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CACTUS LAND

By the same Author
DURBAR

CACTUS LAND

A NOVEL

By

Dennis Kincaid

LONDON

CHATTO & WINDUS

1934

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For

Hugh Arbuthnott

*. . . This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.*

T. S. ELIOT.

CHAPTER ONE

THE single Goanese waiter of "Herbert's Royal Restaurant" straightened himself with a sigh of relief and flicked his duster over his shoulder. He had been cleaning the brightly-coloured board that, hanging from a rusty nail beside the door, rattled in the warm moist wind: the board that was one of the "Royal Restaurant's" most cherished possessions, for it read "In Bounds for British Troops." He was not attractive physically this waiter, for in addition to the gaping mouth and blank eyes of all Goanese he had an enormous goitre, a swelling brown balloon that thrust his head backwards and sideways. He leant against the doorpost and watched the traffic flowing down Hornby Road, the main artery of Bombay Fort, watched the shining cars of rich Parsis, moth-eaten barouches creaking past under the burden of whole Arab families, groups of American tourists in the odd uniforms apparently supplied in the United States to all intending travellers to the East; very patent *topis* with flowing bottle-green veils, khaki coats with innumerable pockets, sandwich-tins and water-bottles.

The waiter sighed. It had always been his dream to get employment as servant to an American tourist, draw a princely salary and be called "Butler Saheb" by porters at railway stations. But his English never seemed to get any better, nor did his neck. And so for as long as he could remember he had been the Royal Restaurant's only waiter, abused by "Mr. Herbert" (the Parsi proprietor with a face like an ant-eater) and called "John" by the soldiers. It was really useless for his relatives in Goa, always badgering for loans the cousin who'd gone to make his fortune in British India, to address their letters to "His Excellency Dom Fernandes, c/o Mr. Herbert," for he had almost forgotten that he had any other name than John.

It was a hot evening. The wind arising with the incoming tide was warm and clammy. The Royal Restaurant had few patrons at this hour. In its long dank hall, lined with mirrors and aspidistras in brass pots, hung with clumsy chandeliers, smelling of damp leather and bugs and spilt beer, were a dozen tables adorned with English cruets and bottles of tomato sauce, a few horsehair sofas along the walls, and an ancient gramophone on a wicker table.

At a table in the corner two English commercial travellers were exchanging stories of how

they had persuaded backward natives to purchase their wholly worthless goods.

"You see, it's only a question of character after all, as I say. I told the old buffer straight out, you can take it or leave it, my son. And you see, these natives haven't any spunk. They can't bluff. Got no idea of it. Never played poker in their lives. Talk to me of the inscrutable Oriental. Inscrutable my hat. Too many gods and too few baths is what I say."

"You're right, Algy. Reminds me of a time when I was in Hongkong. Must have been in '99 or '98. I forget which. Let me think. '99 was when—no it wasn't, was it? I say—this'll take some time to work out. What about the other half?"

"No, I say, this is my shout."

"Go on. Here, boy!"

Dom Fernandes turned away from the street, from dreams of an affluent future when he would strut proudly in white ducks along the honey-coloured streets of Old Goa, ogling the girls in their mauve flounced skirts—and crying "Just-a-coming now, Master" became once more the obsequious John of the inglorious present.

"Righty—no, you have this one. I'll have the next. Well, as I was saying—thanks, beer again for me. Well, here's fun. Cheerio!

Yes, it was in Hongkong—that's as far as I'd got, wasn't it? By the way d'you know Hongkong at all? Oh, it's a grand place. Fine women and no questions asked. Look here, you see where this bottle of H.P. Sauce is—well, we'll call that the Customs Building. Now a few hundred yards to the south, just where this bloody jam jar is——”

At a table further down two English Sergeants were drinking tea with their wives and exchanging slow and decorous comments on life.

“Nothing like tea for a hot evening is there, Mr. Burgess?”

“Ah, you're right there, Mrs. Spencer, nothing like it.”

“Yeheh, so refreshing, I always think. Sort of pulls you together if you know what I mean.”

“Bucks you up, yerse.”

“I felt so tired before. I had to go out to get a yard of cretonne to cover a cushion with. Baby was sick all over the old cover. Pore little mite, it's this damp heat that gets her. Might as well live in a greenhouse I always say, and then you'd be better off, for you'd at least have some flowers to look at. And oh, it was so hot and dusty in the bazar. And the man in the shop was simply aggravating. So slow he was, you'd never believe. I'm sure these wogs de-

liberately misunderstand you, especially when they know you're in a hurry. And when I'd finished my shopping, well, I'm not exaggerating when I say I felt fit to drop. But I feel ever so rested now. After me tea."

In a corner under a large decaying palm two Muhammadan notables from some upcountry state sat staring about them. Their mouths were open and their hands were clasped across their stomachs. They had only had a glass of soda each, but were apparently overcome by the excitement of the place. They had always heard of this restaurant as the centre of European fast life in Bombay and on their first trip to the city had made haste to probe its mysteries. They gazed round the room. This was life indeed. Often would they recall this lapse into dissipation when they chatted together in the evenings at their village, cross-legged on stringed cots, puffing at their hookahs and shaking their heads over the devilries of town life.

Flies clustered murmuringly about the chandelier. The electric fans creaked and wheezed, revolving slowly between cobweb-hung beams. The Sergeants and their wives finished their tea and ordered the bill. The ladies stood up, patted their *topis*, brushed away breadcrumbs from their skirts, put on tinted glasses. "Hurry

up, John" said the Sergeants. The waiter wasted a good deal of time saluting in what he hoped was a military manner. He proffered a slip of paper on a greasy tray, and stood at attention gazing intently at the door. But the tip was only two annas; all that effort wasted; he seemed to wilt sadly, he slouched back to the counter. Mr. Herbert seized the bill from him and peered at it, his long ant-eater's snout almost brushing the paper.

"Here, why haven't you charged them for paper napkins?"

"These military Europeans always refuse to pay that item. Always."

"Brutal and licentious soldiery," said Mr. Herbert, who was fond of Congress newspapers.

Presently two English sailors came in. One was already half drunk and leant against the bar wearily.

"What'll you have Sticks?" asked the other.

"All the same to me Nobby. Can't get anything worth drinking in this mucking town. What wouldn't I give for a real fivepenny 'old an' mild.' Remember the 'Prince of Wales' at Chatham, Nobby?"

"'Course I do. Like to be there now, wouldn't you? Friday nights there was fine."

"Pay night. Got all the fellows there, and

there was always someone who could sing. Remember that 'uge girl was always there? The one in black satin. I like some room to myself, but the boys said she was good value. Cor, she 'ad a voice. Like a foghorn it was. But it made things bright and cheery when she sang."

"Well, here's your drink, Sticks."

"Cheerio Nobby."

Presently Sticks became melancholy. He tapped Nobby on the chest. "I don't know what I would do if you weren't on our ship, Nobby. Most of the other bastards is damn unfriendly. They don't appreciate comb-playing. Now at home I was considered a pretty fair comb-player. I don't want anyone's praise, mind you, nor not anyone's blame. I can stand on my own legs, thank you." He stood up very proud and glared about the room. "But what gets one is these bastards what doesn't know one note of music from another—well criticising. Yes, criticising." He shook his head sadly. "Don' appreciate comb-playing."

Suddenly he brightened up. "But you're different Nobby old pal. You'd like to 'ear a tune on my old comb, wouldn't you?" He fumbled in his pockets for his comb and a piece of tissue-paper.

"Have another drink Sticks."

Sticks forgot about his comb and drew himself up. "This is mine. John, two more of these mucking beers."

Two American sailors had come in and sat under a palm.

"Well, what beats me is the way them bum Parsis leave their pore old dads to be eaten by boids. Bloody great boids."

"Yeah. But listen. I'm mighty sick of all yer high-hat culture. I wanna go places and see goils."

A Highlander came in.

"Eh, Kiltie" said Sticks.

"Eh, look at the white-tops" said the Highlander over his shoulder as though to a friend. He was a Cockney for all his kilts.

"Why, I do believe," said Nobby very slowly.

"Well, if it isn't Ginger!"

"Why, it's old Nobby Grant!"

"Ginger old pal, 'ow are yer?"

"Fine, thanks. How's yourself?"

"Grand. I say Ginger, it does me eyes good to see you."

"M'm! Ain't seen each other since—why, three years ago. The old Forty-Nine."

"Outside Charing Cross."

"Well, where you bin all this time, Nobby?"

"Where've I been? I've muckin' well bin eleven months in the Persian Gulf."

"Persian Gulf?"

"Yes. Ever been there?"

"No."

"Well, don't. It's the world's ——"

"Is that so!"

"It is. Miles an' miles o' muck-all. An' a fair mucker of a Captain. Drink? Ask me if he drank. Always drunk an' always in a muckin' temper. And the climate. Well, it was hot as hell. Gor, we 'ad four men went crackers in one month. *An'* no shore-leave and a mucker of a Chaplain who went silly. Well, I wasn't sorry. 'Eard too much from him anyway. But 'e went silly, so here's to him. Drink up Ginger old pal."

"Ow d'you mean, silly?"

"Well, not crackers but silly-like. We put 'im off at Basra, an' did without a Chaplain, an' that was quite all right with me."

"In Bombay long?"

"Five days, then back to that lovely Gulf. An' I'm not impressed with Bombay, don't mind tellin' you Ginger."

"Impressed? Why it's a mess, Bombay is. Can't go into any hotel. Uniforms not allowed. Oo, it's one of those awful rowdy Tommies.

No, no; can't 'ave 'em in 'ere. Might raise their voices. Get drunk even. Who's going to get drunk when beer costs a muckin' rupee a bottle? . . . It's different when there's trouble. Oh, quite different. Then it's, Oo, soldier, save my child. Well, Tommy, you saved the situation an' yer country's proud of you. But when they're not frightened out of their lives, well, the less they see of you the better they like it. And that's your own race, your own flesh and blood as they say. Sit down in a cinema next to a *lady* an' up she gets, drawin' her skirts about her an' moves further along."

"Well," said Sticks very judicially. "You must look on both sides of the question. There's some fellows who is real bastards would disgrace themselves anywhere——"

"Eh, put a sock in it," said Nobby.

Sticks began to laugh.

"Well, what's the matter now, cackling like an old hen?"

"I'm going to sing to you," said Sticks.

"This old hat o' mine
The inside is quite clean,
But the outside has seen
Some dirty weather.
Well, I've finished with it now
Altogether."

He threw his hat into a corner. Nobby leant over to Ginger. "Just get a taxi, will you, and we'll send him back. He always undresses when he sings this song."

"This old shirt of mine," sang Sticks.

"I say, Sticks old pal, we're just going out for a moment. Ginger knows of a damn good place round the corner."

"Got to finish this song."

"You can do that in the next place."

Sticks sighed, the misunderstood artist, "Righto."

They put him in the taxi. "R.I.M. Dockyard," said Nobby. "And hurry, George."

"What about you?"

"We're coming in the next taxi. We're just going to pick up a girl."

"Shan't I come with you?"

"We'll be along in a minute. Besides you haven't got your hat." Sticks nodded gloomily. The taxi bore him away still nodding. It was dark now and the lights of the "Royal Restaurant" shone through an array of coloured bottles.

When they returned they found two Eurasian girls sitting at a table near the bar. Ginger banged against the table and said, "Well, I *am* sorry, ladies."

"Oh, please don't mention it," the Eurasians said mincingly. "A pleasure, I'm sure."

Ginger gave Nobby an enormous wink. "Bit late for tea isn't it?" he asked the girls.

"Yes, we've had ours," the girls said, "at home."

They had straw hats with coloured flowers and corkscrew curls. One was bashful but feverishly excited. What a place! Well, Maria had told her about these restaurants where you met English soldiers and sailors, but it had taken her a long time to agree to accompany her. Supposing her parents found out—her stout forbidding mother with her Pompadour coiffure and mauve blouse and jingling chains, sitting all day sewing in the sitting-room of their little bungalow with its wicker chairs adorned with pink silk bows. The other girl was more self-possessed. She looked across at her companion. What a pity Rita was wriggling in that hysterical way. Everyone would think her silly, would guess it was her first evening out. Well, everyone had to start. You had to have some fun. Working in a shop all day. Well, you'd die if you didn't have some fun.

"What'll you have?" Nobby asked. Maria looked very earnestly at him. What a handsome boy he was, with tousled yellow hair and

brown eyes, and a lovely strong neck—you could see the fine brown flesh branching out towards the shoulders and framed by his blue collar.

"I'll have a liqueur," she said pursing her lips.

"And you?"

Rita giggled, wriggling. "I simply don't know. Oh my, what a problem."

"Have some beer?"

Both girls shrieked with laughter.

"I should have a glass of sherry, Rita. That can't do you any harm."

"Oh, sherry please."

They drank very daintily, little finger rigidly outstretched.

Maria began to tease Ginger to show off before Rita.

"I like your skirt."

"Well, kilts is useful sometimes. But not in a wind."

"Why ever not in a wind? Go on, you don't mean you don't wear anything underneath? Oh, what an idea. But I bet you really wear drawers."

"No, I don't."

"Oo, go on."

"How much d'yer bet?"

"Won't bet," she pouted.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Well, let's see and then maybe I will."

"Maria!" cried Rita, shocked. And then upsetting some of her sherry, she coughed and spluttered. "Allow me," said Ginger, wiping her skirt with a red bandana.

"Thanks ever so."

"That's all right."

Presently Ginger and Rita were deep in a whispered conversation.

"I say, you and me'll go for a little stroll, what d'you say? It's hot in here, and your friend's quite happy."

Nobby said something in Maria's ear and she shrieked with laughter. "Well, you are a bold chap. I expect all you sailors are the same."

Nobby took her hand, protesting his innocence. He drew her towards him.

"We can leave them to it," whispered Ginger.

"Well, where're you going?"

"What about a drive in a carriage?"

"Oo, that'll be lovely."

She no longer felt nervous. The sherry had seemed to infuse her with a delicious daring. And then miraculously the glass was full again. She looked round with sparkling eyes.

"One more glass," Ginger urged. "And then we'll go."

"Well, I declare you'll make me quite tipsy."

"A drink never did anyone any harm," said Ginger with ponderous gravity. "Same again John."

And then that sherry had gone, and she was telling Ginger all about her life and how severe her mother was, never letting her go out with men, and what a good time Maria had and how she'd always envied her.

Not of course that she wanted to do anything wrong. That would be dreadful and she could never face her mother. But a girl must have some fun some time in her life. As long as it wasn't really wrong.

"That's all right, little girl. You'll be all right with me. Trust old Ginger."

Must get her out of here soon or she'll begin to cry. Not used to the alcohol, you could see that.

"Oh well," he stood up, stretching. "See you later Nobby."

"That's right Ginger."

"See you in the morning Rita" Maria called.

And then they were in a carriage and the night wind blew warmly in their faces. The palms rustled along the road and the lights of the shops grew fainter.

"Where are we going?"

"Just down by Back Bay."

The lights along Malabar Hill were a bridge of gold in the sky. In the distance the sea murmured and sighed. The carriage smelt of horsehair and cheap hair-oil, the seats were shiny and hard. They turned off down a sandy path towards the sea, the clatter of the horse's hoofs was suddenly muffled, the wheels seeped softly over dry sand. The wind whistled among low bushes, scraps of paper fluttered and flew past. The wheels clacked against an old tin.

"All right, George" said Ginger. The driver grunted, pulled up, slipped his whip into its socket with a clatter and climbed down from his box. They could see him squat down on a sandhill and caught the flicker of a match.

"Now then," said Ginger roughly. He pulled her towards him. She was trembling, half nervous and half ecstatic. He smelt of khaki and brass-polish. He unbuttoned his tunic and she buried her face in the coarse grey stuff of his shirt, clinging to him.

CHAPTER TWO

GRANT ROAD was always the gayest quarter of Bombay at two or three in the morning. In the cafés pock-marked Arabs and heavy-featured Persians argued interminably over their tiny cups of coffee, boys ran to and fro with newspapers, beggars exhibited noisily their complicated and revolting ailments, gramophones whined and rasped, and young fellows on bicycles flashed past with a prodigious ringing of bells and a storm of insults for those who lingered in their path. The courtesans went to and fro in their floating veils and high-heeled shoes, and the pimps ran alongside the passing carriages bellying out the attractions of the wares at their disposal. From the latticed upper windows drifted down a faint scent of musk and the low thrumming of guitars.

But from the main thoroughfare of Grant Road branched off innumerable curving side-streets, winding backward in mazy recesses into the heart of the old city, lined by tall thin houses whose bare walls were covered with dripping water and green slime. From narrow

barred windows, like caged animals the women looked out beseechingly. Occasionally a narrow lattice high up in some blind wall was flung open and an old woman's harsh screaming voice re-echoed among the roofs. Many of the houses had neither door nor window and their featureless blank faces stared with maniac fixity out upon the tortuous gorges of the old streets. A rickety door yawned at the top of a flight of worn stone steps, and framed by warm pink light a stout negress was sitting, dressed up as an English child, with a sailor blouse and a big blue bow in her hair, waiting patiently for her clients.

At the far end of the courtesans' quarter was a grand new house, gay with white stucco and a painted frieze illumined by a double line of electric lights. Two red-coated servants guarded the front door over which rustled a curtain of glass beads. The young bloods who strutted past nudged each other and said, "The house of Bali." For Bali was a new dancer from the North. She had been the mistress of a Raja and had brought his state to bankruptcy. The crowds used to demonstrate outside her villa singing,

"Ayi hai Bali
Sub mulk khali."

"Bali has come and all the kingdom is drained dry." Finally the Imperial Government interfered, a British administrator was appointed and the Supernumerary Begum (as she was referred to with official caution in the various despatches) was ordered to leave the state. She settled in Bombay and invested her money in building the smartest house in the courtesans' quarter.

But on this evening Bali had shut her doors early and refused to receive anyone. The musicians had been sent home and the doorkeepers dozed on the front steps. And Bali sat at her window, which looked away from the city and towards the sea, and watched the firefly glimmer of fishing-boats in the harbour.

"I suppose I'm a fool," she said to herself; "what do I want with a child anyway?" But the Eurasian girl who had come weeping to the door and besought her for the love of heaven to shelter a baby had somehow aroused her pity. At first she had roughly refused.

"Don't you know who I am?"

And the girl smiling through her tears said pathetically, "No, but I'm sure you will have pity. You see I was wandering through the city and I saw this house and you were standing at the door and you looked kind; and, oh God,

if you don't help me I shall drown myself." She began sobbing again, leaning against the doorpost, a little bundle wrapped in a blanket clutched to her heart.

"Oh well, let's look at it," and she had been surprised to see how fair the child was. She looked at the girl. She would have been pretty but that her eyes were swollen and her hair fell tousled across her forehead and her mouth drooped with despair. But she was not fair. Bali guessed and gave a curious little laugh with a catch in it; well, most of us start that way, she thought.

And in the end she had agreed to take the child. Who knows, she might come in useful as a servant—or if she grew up at all pretty might even be a dancer—"Perhaps she'll keep me in my old age" Bali said with a sudden grimace.

"All right," she said with a sigh, and calling one of her women told her to take the baby inside.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," the girl cried hysterically, "God will bless you, will reward you." She caught Bali's hand and covered it with kisses.

Bali patted her head and said, "You look ill, child. Better come in and rest."

"No, I must go on. I can't stay. Oh, it's so good of you. I shall always remember and pray for you. I——" but she broke down, and turning ran off down the street. Bali watched her spindly legs swaying uncertainly on the absurdly high heels and the paper flowers nodding in her black straw hat; then, shrugging her shoulders, she began to roll a cigarette. The palms of her hands were dyed vermilion and her nails gilded. Presently she turned and went slowly in, her heavy bangles jangling at elbow and ankle. Her women had put the child in a swing, a gold and scarlet lacquered swing from Hala Nava, and were admiring it.

"See how fair it is," they murmured. "A little white rose."

"It seems to be an Englishman's child," Bali said casually. "We'll call it an English name. Do you know of an English name?"

The women looked at each other, wrinkled their foreheads. Then one remembered, "Isn't Kitti an English name?"

"Kitti?" Bali's voice was dubious. "It's not ugly. We'll call her Kitti-Jan."

CHAPTER THREE

THE outside of Bali the dancer's house was superb. Stucco figures of gods and elephants and monkeys trooped along the roof, an eagle spread its wings at each corner of the walls, paintings of palms and yellow tigers and blue apes stretched from window to window. But the inside of the house was sketchy. There was a grand upper room which ran the whole length of the building, wherein Bali gave her concerts. It had a beautiful Shirazi carpet on the floor, a pile of embroidered cushions along the wall for guests to recline against, prints of Raja Varma's paintings on the walls, and great bags of scarlet silk which veiled the lights. And leading off from this main apartment was a bedroom, the ceremonial bedroom, with a large four-poster hung with tattered silk curtains, covered with a yellow lace counterpane having at each corner a large red bow, and a pillow which had on it a portrait of King Edward VII worked in coloured thread.

But unless she was entertaining company Bali slept, not in this grand bed which was stuffy and

lumpy, but on a string cot in an attic under the roof. The house had never been finished, and the wall here gaped with a wide impromptu window, so that at night you got a wonderful breeze from the harbour. Kitti slept on a cot beside Bali. She generally woke early and watched the grey light creeping across the oily sea, and lying on her back, arms folded under her head, she stared up at the cobwebby tiles of the roof and heard the carts passing in the cobbled streets below. Bali slept on till mid-day and was in a bad temper all day if she had to get up any earlier. But Kitti had to be up soon after dawn to bring milk from the bazar. Quietly she sat up, dropped her feet to the floor, and climbed softly down the rickety ladder that led to the attic. As you looked down the house seemed like the interior of a wrecked and derelict ship. There were so many beams and rafters standing out greyly over a chasm of blackness, half-finished landings, spidery ladders crossing each other like lattice-work. Bali had been determined to have the tallest house in the dancers' quarter, but once the outer shell of the house looked smart, and once the room to dance in and the ceremonial bedroom was finished and approved, she lost interest in the rest of the house, began

to grudge the money that was continually being demanded, became irritated at having workmen tramping about in her house, peering in at her, splashing paint about the place, shouting directions—and one day in a rage she had ordered them all off the premises, paid off the contractor and left the house just as it then was.

One side of the house faced the street, the other looked inward upon a square courtyard with a well in the centre and a pink champak-tree in one corner. When Kitti came out into the courtyard she always found Mother there already, ordering the servants about, watching the water being drawn from the well. Everyone called her Mother, for no one knew what her real name was, nor if indeed she was really Bali's mother. She never called Bali anything but Parbati Jan, which had been her name till she descended triumphantly on Bhingarh State and the Raja had renamed her.

"Is Parbati Jan still sleeping?" she always asked Kitti.

"Yes Mother, she has not stirred."

"Good. Good. She will be fresh for the evening, for her dancing."

The old woman came close and peered into Kitti's face. Kitti always thought she looked

like an enormous frog with her wide pouting mouth and creased leathery skin. But her eyes were still magnificent.

"Eh, you will never be as pretty as my Parbati Jan," she muttered. "You are so thin. Why don't you get some flesh on you, child? The men like something they can feel. They want an armful for their money. You should have seen me when I was young. . . ."

And she began talking of the old days in Delhi. She had once been the mistress of Prince Salim Mirza, and in that brief dream-empire that flickered for a few months through the summer of '57 she had been a person of importance in the northern capital. She loved to tell Kitti of the gorgeous life in that old Moghul world. Where the Chandni Chowk now runs had flowed a wide canal bordered with wide avenues, and there the nobles rode jingling up and down on April evenings and the courtesans went past in their silk-curtained litters.— "Oh, those lovely palanquins, their curtains embroidered with purple peacocks, and swaying so beautifully, swaying, swaying down the street, *jhampta—jhampta*," she imitated the roll with her hands, "*jhumpta—jhumpta* swinging along like lordly elephants." And at the end of the avenue was the glorious toppling mass of the

Lahore Gate, rose-red, guarded by elephants, the entry to the gardens of the Padishah.

“And your face is so set, child. There is no expression in it. Your eyes are opaque and heavy. Oh, you’ll never be a credit to me and to Parbati. Well, hurry along now and get the milk.”

Ever since she could remember Kitti had had to fetch the milk in the early morning. Mother had a rooted conviction that the servants could not be trusted to do this; they would spill the milk or drink it or let the dust in.

So Kitti took a brass *lota* and went out by a side-door from the courtyard into the street.

It was already hot in the bazar, the air steamy and damp. The pavements were blocked with beds, and many people were still asleep; others sat on the edge of their bed and yawned and rubbed their eyes or cleaned their teeth with sprigs of the Nim-tree. Pariah-dogs suffering from every known variety of mange wandered about between the legs of the beds picking up here a crust, there a piece of paper in which meat had been wrapped.

The milk-seller poured out milk into her *lota*, sweet frothy buffalo’s milk, rubbed his thumb on his shirt, took two brown coins from Kitti. Now she had to walk very carefully, for

Mother liked to see the milk brimming the rim. She would have liked to have been able to carry the *lota* on her head like the village women did, or on her shoulder like Bali when she danced the *lota*-dance, the dance of the water-carrier. But her movements were so awkward and gawky, she was always dropping things, and she could never learn to walk with a slow swing like Bali, the even roll of the hips, the feet placed flat on the ground, one in front of the other, as she walked. Her own legs were so spindly and she had no hips, and she walked with jerky, bobbing movements.

It seemed useless Bali teaching her. She had a lesson every afternoon. The musicians came and squatted by the window in the long upper room and Mother squatted beside them, blinking and clucking with disapproval as she watched Kitti following laboriously the figures of a dance. Bali reclined against the cushions along the wall, smoking interminable cigarettes and directing Kitti's movements in her deep hoarse voice.

"Yes, the left foot now, raise your arms slowly, holding in each hand between finger and thumb a fold of your skirt. Slowly, slowly, your head back and mouth half open. But my dear child, do try to look as if you meant what

you are dancing. This is the Usha-Dance, the dance of the Dawn. You must try and make your audience believe in what you are dancing. Just watch a moment."

She got up, threw her cigarette spinning out of the window, spat in a long-necked silver spittoon. Then she began to dance. The musicians who had been languidly strumming woke up. The sitar-player plucked deep plangent chords from his gourd-shaped instrument, the sarangi-player swept the strings with his great bow drawing forth a sweet watery music, and the drummer, sitting up erect, straightening his turban and drawing his two drums towards him, began to beat out a new and thrilling rhythm. And Bali threw back her head like one asleep, her mouth parted as though in satiety after ecstasy. And slowly she awoke to movement, her beautiful round arms slowly lifted the ends of her wide skirt, her head bent sideways, this side and then that, her eyes opened lingeringly, and slowly she moved her feet, the ankle-bells stirring into music.

"Aha!" cried Mother and began to gabble with excitement.

Bali broke off suddenly. "That's the way to start," she said. "Now try again."

But Kittie never seemed to improve. Her

thin arms were so stiff. She could never feel in her body that sensuous ripple that seemed to inspire Bali's slow and graceful motions.

Bali sighed. "All right. Try the hand movements now. I'll run through them first." And without getting up she showed her the various forces of the hands—the *bramara*, when the fingers are held so as to resemble a bee in flight, which represents union with the divine; the *alapadma*, when the hands are held flat to resemble a rice-mortar, which represents the universe at the feet of God; the *udvestitala padma*, when the hands are held together with fingers outstretched to represent the lotus upon which Krishna dances; the *Garuda*, when the fingers are stiff like wings to signify an eagle, which is the chariot of Vishnu; the *maya nritya* and the *pang-hat nritya*, which are less easy to express.

Bali's slender fingers flickered through these motions with the grace and lightness of a moth, and Kitti watching her felt, as always, a bitter pang of envy. She looked down at her own hands, so broad and flat with knobby blunted fingers. No matter how well she tinted the palms with vermilion and gilded the nails, the hands remained clumsy and coarse. She knew even before she stood up to imitate Bali's hand-motions that her fingers would go stiff and un-

manageable, that the movements which seemed so easy and natural when Bali did them would become impossibly involved as soon as she tried them.

Bali was very patient. "Child, you are meant to be doing the *bramara*. Your fingers are supposed to resemble a bee in flight. Think of a bee, the golden body all atremble, the wings a shimmer of transparent gauze. Try and feel the sunny life of it in your fingers. Well, what *has* happened to your thumb?—Sticking stiffly out at the side. One would think you were trying to represent a cow instead of a bee."

Kitti tried again. The musicians were resting; they leant back against the balcony rail outside the window, smoking and spitting, pulling off their turbans to scratch their heads, yawning and scratching. Mother watched Kitti's movements, following every finger-motion with hard bright eyes and wagging her head and chuntering with disgust.

Presently Bali sighed, "Well, that'll do for today. Now just sing me your English songs," for Bali had taught her a few coarse English songs. These always went down well with an unsophisticated audience. Not with connoisseurs of the dance, of course, but with the casual idlers who

dropped in for an hour's amusement and wearied after a while of classical dancing.

"Yes, you sing those quite well. I hope you keep on working at your English? Good. It always comes in useful, especially nowadays when everyone speaks it."

"Ah, but in the old days," put in Mother, "what a difference! Then a man's culture was judged by the way he spoke Urdu. The moment he opened his mouth you could tell if he were a gentleman or a boor. Now, who cares about the Urdu? It's all this English, which I've always refused to learn."

"That's right, Mother," Bali soothed her, "you speak such beautiful Urdu that no one would want you to speak English."

"Ah, Parbati you mischievous creature, you always know how to flatter your poor old Mother. Ah well, I learnt my Urdu in Delhi in the old days when there was an Emperor there. And my Prince Salim. Yes. . . . Yes . . ." and she began to cry quietly to herself, her old face puckered up into a thousand wrinkles.

Kitti went and sat beside her, nestling against her. She felt no particular affection for the old woman but she knew that such demonstrativeness was expected of her. The old woman began to smooth her hair.

"Ah, you're a good girl, but you'll never be a dancer, never. Poor child, you'll never have the men after you."

Kitti bit her lip. She hated it when she was told that, though she felt it was true.

Oh yes, true enough. Why, in the evenings the men hardly looked at her. They came stumping up the rickety stairs with gay silk turbans and gold-knobbed canes and called out greetings to Bali, who reclined composedly against the wall. They complimented Mother, who giggled with a senile pleasure, and then when they saw Kitti they either asked her for another cushion or chucked her under the chin and pinched her arms.

And then the musicians tuned up and Bali began to dance and the men fell silent, following her every movement with admiring eyes, occasionally breaking out into cries of "Wawah! Shabash!" Kitti served drinks and handed round silver trays of spices or made up little packets of crushed betel-nut, wrapping them in *pan*-leaves.

They hardly looked up and thanked her, but took the spices and *pan*-leaves, popped them into their mouths, chewed for a while and then spat out the shredded remains into the silver spittoon that was passed round at regular intervals. And

all the time Bali danced or sang. In moments of enthusiasm the men would take out ten-rupee notes from a fold in their turbans and flick them forward on to the carpet. Bali would smile her thanks but never interrupt her dance. It was always Mother, who, creeping forward (more like a huge bullfrog than ever, Kittie thought), collected the precious notes and stuffed them in her bodice. And after a while, when Bali was tired, she used to tell Kittie to sing one of her English songs. The men would laugh a little, if they were drunk they might laugh uproariously, but they would start talking again and presently lose interest in Kittie and her songs. But Kittie would never be allowed to do a serious dance unless there were very few or very unimportant people present. So she would spend her evening leaning against the wall, handing out more drinks and cigarettes, and watching Bali's exquisite movements with an agony of envy.

At two or three in the morning the men would begin to leave. If any had a further proposal to make he would be plunged in serious discussion with Mother, there would be a shuffling of notes, the man urging, Mother showing shocked surprise at such a mean offer; finally Mother nodded contentedly, counting the notes over

and over again and then stuffing them inside her bodice. And when everyone else had gone Mother would leer at Bali and make a sign with her head in the direction of the candidate for her affections. Bali would smile and walk across to the bedroom and the man would follow. Then Mother and Kitti would tidy up the room, empty out the spittoons, wash the glasses, pile the empty bottles in the cupboard under the stairs. And Kitti, half dead with fatigue, her eyes smarting with cigarette smoke, would stumble up to her stringed cot in the attic and cry herself to sleep because no man would ever want her.

CHAPTER FOUR

BALI had hoped that, though Kitti would never make a really competent dancer, the men might be attracted by her youth and freshness, perhaps even by her rather pathetic awkwardness. After all, the child was very fair, her face was oval and the features small and well-cut; but the expression was dead, as though all life had been drained out of the face. And she had no vivacity or wit. In India a courtesan is expected to be something of an Aspasia; a man goes to her house for an hour's entertainment and he expects his hostess to amuse and stimulate him. But no one seemed to be stimulated by Kitti's sad, pale face. When they spoke to her she answered with formal phrases or with some conventional *riposte* that Bali had taught her, and her lifeless voice robbed the words of all meaning or charm.

And Bali sighed and presently gave up teaching her to dance and Kitti became more and more of a servant. It was a pity, Bali reflected, for if only the child had been more of a success she might have earned money which would be

useful. This question of money hardly arose during the War and the two years succeeding it, for everyone had money and spent it recklessly. But Bali never saved anything; she spent every rupee on clothes and jewellery. As long as Mother was alive the house was run fairly economically, but in the last year of the War the old woman died, crying in her last moments for her old lover Prince Salim Mirza, and begging that she might be carried to the window to see the sun rise for the last time on the gardens of the Moghul. And after her death Bali's affairs fell into disorder. The servants robbed her, the shopkeepers presented her with huge bills that she sometimes paid with the air of an Empress and at other times scrutinised querulously, questioning each item, falling into a rage and sobbing that they were all bandits persecuting a poor, lonely woman. And with the '21 slump she found her clientèle diminishing. The rich young Muhammadans who had thronged her house came no more, for their fathers were bankrupt. And for the first time in her life she became anxious about the future—she, Bali, who had once been autocrat of a state.

If only that girl Kitti could somehow contribute, pay her share. . . . After all, I've brought

her up, treated her well, given her beautiful clothes. . . . Kitti knew that Bali was thinking these things, and it made her desperate. Sometimes she almost hated Bali. After all, it's not my fault if I'm clumsy and awkward. I've worked for hours on end, worked till every muscle ached, but I'm not made to be a dancer. And the men never look at me, because they've never heard of me. Bali, oh Bali, the famous dancer, they come in ready to admire and never think of anyone else. I've never had a chance.

Bali had a recurring nightmare that she might fall ill. She pictured herself lying helpless in her room while the servants ransacked the house and deserted her; she imagined herself contracting some frightful disease which would disfigure her for life; she dreaded the thought of old age. She was always buying quack medicines, advertisements for which are the main revenue of all Indian papers. She bought "Apharak Bhasma" of which the advertisement said, "Shall change an old woman into quite young one in ten (10) minutes"; and various tonics which claimed "to inherit one thousand influences of Fire."

Of late she had felt an increasing weariness in the mornings. She would wake in terror to find a vague little ache in her thighs, a heavi-

ness all down her legs. With the day it would pass off and she would regain her radiant vivacity by the evening. But there was always at the back of her mind an increasing fear.

And one morning in March she opened her eyes and her head was aching terribly. She put her hand up to her forehead and cried out. She had never felt such pain. She cried again and Kitti came running, pattering up the rickety ladder.

"Oh, ugh, the pain," Bali gasped.

"Where is it?"

"Here in my forehead."

Kitti sat on the edge of Bali's bed and began to massage her forehead as Mother had taught her, slow careful pressure over the eyebrows, the thumbs gently kneading the skin, the fingers caressing, soothing. Presently Bali felt better.

"You're a good girl Kitti. The pain is better now. I shall be all right in the evening."

But she wasn't. . . . And what am I to do about my clients? There aren't so many nowadays that I can afford to disappoint them. . . .

"Kitti!" She came running again. "Look, Kitti, I'm not well enough to dance to-night. You'll have to take my place. Do your best, child. I haven't given you any lessons for a long time. Try and remember, though, what

I used to tell you. Try and dance as if it meant something to you. If it doesn't mean something to you, you can't expect it to mean anything to your audience. And the finger-movements, get them quick and alive. The bee-movement you remember? A real live bee spinning about a clump of cobra-lilies. . . . Oh, my head. . . ."

Twice or three times before nightfall she called Kitti again and exhorted her, and all the time she was tortured by the fear that some rich new client might call, see only poor Kitti's clumsy posturings and go away in disgust, never to return. But she need not have worried; only a few men came that night, and when Kitti babbled Bali's apologies but begged them to stay and she would do her best to entertain them, most of them turned away, tramping heavily downstairs and slamming the front door angrily. A few youths stayed, more out of curiosity than anything, clapped in a languid way after each dance, giggled when she made mistakes, called loudly and rudely for drinks. Usually Kitti served the drinks, but to-night she had to entrust that to a servant. He was slow and sullen, resenting the extra duty imposed on him. He brought the cigarettes in his hot hand instead of in a silver jar, he couldn't fold the *pan*-leaves

properly for the packets of crushed betel-nut. And Kitti couldn't concentrate on her dancing for watching the servant, and whispering sudden directions to him, and praying that he wouldn't do something really awful—spill some whiskey on one of the men's flowered shirts or trip up on the carpet-edge and sprawl over the floor smashing all the glasses. It was agony to watch his rough handling of Bali's beautiful crockery, blue Delhi ware. If he smashed any she would be blamed. And all the time she was supposed to be dancing. Those hand-movements, the bee hovering among cobra-lilies, the fingers a shimmer of pearly gauze. . . . There, I knew he'd fill that glass too full, the froth of the beer rises over the edge, falls. . . .

And then suddenly she saw him. She had not seen him come in. But he had been there the other night; he had sat quietly in a corner and had thanked her softly when she offered him cigarettes. He was beautiful, a young Punjabi Sayed she guessed, with grey eyes and brown hair cut like a page's and a blue-and-white striped turban. His eyes met hers and he smiled—oh, such a flash of white strong teeth—and involuntarily she smiled back. And suddenly she felt quite confident. What did it matter if that ridiculous servant spilt beer over

everything, over everybody. There was only one man in the room that mattered, and she began to dance for him. She did the dawn-dance; and she imagined herself asleep, the warm dawn drowsiness; and then being awakened by the touch of his hand. His face near to hers, those bright grey eyes and buttered hair swinging forward over his forehead, and that full mouth parting and the smile breaking out like a crescent moon between clouds. . . . She was hardly aware that the chatter and laughter had died down, that there was a murmur of appreciation and whispered voices, "Why, that's much better. She's dancing well now. Must have been nervous at first. Ah, that was a perfect gesture. Wawah!" . . . She had forgotten Bali's endless instructions, to keep the elbow out here, the fingers crooked so, the head bent first this side and then that. The movements of the dance came for the first time effortlessly, unconsciously. Suddenly she knew she could dance and her whole body rejoiced. Slowly she raised her arms holding the ends of her pleated shimmering skirt, like a peacock spreading his tail to greet the dawn. She stamped her feet and the ankle-bells rang; she clicked her fingers and spun round, rigid in ecstasy. The day has come and the earth worships her lord the sun; she was

the sunflower following Phaethon with adoring gaze. As she finished she gave a cry of "Hah!" half in triumph, half in relief; and the men burst into applause. But she only looked for one face, the young Sayed's. And he was staring at her, his grey eyes blazing.

She danced again and again laughing with excitement, and the men flicked ten-rupee notes over the carpet and she told the servant to pick them up. At last she stopped, gasping and laughing.

"Oh, I'm tired." She subsided on a pile of cushions against the wall.

The men chaffed her and she was so pleased and happy that she answered back. She forgot to be timid and laboured; she made coarse jokes, told the fat Hindu by the window how she had guessed he must be impotent, and the young Muhammadan blood with the rose over his ear that he wore the wide Turkish trousers to conceal his exaggerated endowments. But the young Sayed in the corner never said anything, or laughed at her jokes. He sat quietly smoking, watching her.

Presently the other men got up to go, and they complimented her warmly saying "We must tell Bali that she ought to let you dance more. It's a shame you should waste your time

with the drinks when you can dance as well as that." And laughing, she thanked them. The excitement had brought some colour to her cheeks, and as she stood at the door watching them file down the staircase she caught sight of herself in a mirror and suddenly realised she was looking pretty. Then she turned back into the room and the Sayed was standing in the middle waiting quietly.

"Oh," she gasped, and her nervousness began to return. The musicians were fumbling with their instruments. The Sayed took a handful of rupees from his sash, threw them to the musicians and said, "Run along." They salaamed respectfully, calling him "Khan Saheb", and filed out.

He wants me, she thought with a tremor, the first man who has ever wanted me. She could have kissed his feet with gratitude. But wait. . . . Bali had told her, had always warned her to be careful with men. Money first and no argument. It was the only way, Bali said. She began to stammer, apologising for the request, for her impertinence in asking him. . . .

He smiled and took a ring off his finger. "That's for yourself" he said. "As for the rest," and he put a little packet of notes on the table.

She gave a little sob. "Forgive me for asking you."

He took her in his arms, smoothed her hair, kissed her soft neck. She lifted her face, her eyes misted with tears; and just as she had pictured it while she danced his full mouth parted, came nearer and was one with hers.

She led him to the next room. It was the first time she had passed a night there. It was stuffy and she drew up the venetian blinds, the night wind came in cool and moist, bellying the lace curtains round and back into the room. There was a faint greenish glow from the street.

She began in a businesslike way the various lubricities that Bali had told her men enjoyed, especially old men who required rousing.

"Ah no," cried the Sayed, and he took her in his arms, covered her face with kisses. They lay for a long time quiet, cheek against cheek. She felt the embroidery of the pillow rough against her neck.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," she faltered. "Bali always said——"

"Bali!" he snorted. "She's old and fat. . . ."

It gave her exquisite pleasure to hear him say that. Bali, who had always scoffed at her: Men will never like you, my child.

"And I?" she prompted.

"You are a white magnolia-petal, your face is oval like a pipal-leaf, your eyes shine like fire-flies on a summer night."

"Oh," she cried, "don't tease me. No one has ever spoken like that before."

"No one has ever looked at you properly. They come because Bali has a name, and they haven't the wit to see that she is long past her prime, and that in her shadow has grown up a far sweeter flower."

She began to stroke his breast. It was firm and hard like polished wood. The line of his thigh was a dim contour, against the green-lit window. He bent over to kiss her. His hair fell all about her face. It was soft and warm and faintly perfumed with musk.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEXT morning Bali felt better. She questioned Kitti carefully about the previous evening. How many people came? Only eight? Oh, others came but went away immediately, and only eight stayed. I see. She wasn't altogether displeased that men had gone away in disgust, disappointed and upset to miss seeing Bali. As long as there were not some important new client among them—there wasn't? All old faces? Ah, that's all right then.

"And how did you dance?"

"I danced very well" Kitti tossed her head.

"H'm," said Bali grimly. "Well, I only hope you remembered a few of the things I told you."

"They applauded me. They said it was a shame you never let me dance ordinarily. They said when they came again they wanted to see me dance."

Bali looked curiously at her. Was the girl lying, or had the men been teasing her?

"And I don't suppose any man——"

It was the question Kitti had been waiting for.

"As a matter of fact," she said very casually, "a handsome young Punjabi stayed behind. This is what he gave me." She opened her hand and showed the packet of notes crumpled in her hot little palm.

Bali pounced forward. "He gave you all that?" She took Kitti by the shoulders. "Are you speaking the truth, child?"

"Of course I am." Kitti stared back proudly. Bali's eyes dropped to the notes in her hand. She took them and began counting them. Then her eyes fell on the ring the Sayed had given Kitti. "And what's that?"

"That's a ring he gave me for myself."

"Oho, well, let's look at it."

Kitti held out her hand. Bali tried to draw the ring off her finger, but Kitti snatched back her hand. "No! He said it was for me."

"Don't be silly child. They all say that sort of thing beforehand. He wanted to flatter you."

"No!" She stood back against the wall, her hand behind her back, her head up.

"You silly girl," Bali began to laugh gently. "You don't believe all that nonsense the men talk at that hour of the night do you? He must have been drunk; and we'll be having him round in an hour or two begging for the ring back, saying it was a present from his mother."

"No, you are wrong," Kitti spoke in a quick, gasping whisper, "you don't understand. He loves me. He said so. He's coming again to see me—me—me."

"There, what a state you're getting into, Kitti. Oh well, I suppose the first time is rather unnerving."

"It was so long ago in your case that you can't even remember what it was like."

Behind her rising irritation Bali almost unconsciously noted that Kitti was getting very quick with her tongue. Improving. She might soon be able to exchange passably witty badinage with their clients. But she mustn't sharpen her wit on me, Bali added to herself; I'm not going to stand any impertinence.

She spoke more harshly. "You are over-excited and silly. Do you think anyone has ever heard of you? They all come to this house because of me, because I am famous. This young man of yours—well, we shall have to see him before we can judge—but do you imagine he came here for any other reason except to see the dancer, Bali, and then I wasn't here, and so, poor boy——"

"No, it wasn't like that at all."

"Don't contradict and shout like that."

"You've got no right to say things like that."

Why shouldn't I tell you what really happened?" Bali held up her hand, frowning. "I will go on, I will. He came here before and he said he noticed me and he came again,—he came last night—just to see me. Not you——"

"That'll do," said Bali in a thin harsh voice.

"Not you, but me. He loves *me*," her voice rose to a shriek, "and he said you are old and fat."

Bali stood quite still, staring at Kitti, the life draining out of her face.

"You're mad" she said in a whisper.

"No I'm not," Kitti began sobbing, "I'm not mad. I wouldn't have said that, but you taunted me. You've always said no one would ever want me, and now when someone comes and loves me you try and spoil it all, sneering and scoffing. Haven't I got feelings, too? What do you think it's meant to me to be told ever since I can remember that I'm clumsy and ugly and that no man would ever look twice at me, and then to have this happen?—so lovely he was, so beautiful and gentle," she broke down, crying bitterly.

Bali looked at her, a gleam of anger behind her long eyes. I shall never forgive her, she thought, never; never, so long as I live. And after all I've done for her. Brought her up, fed

her, clothed her. She would have starved but for me. And this is all the return I get. To be called old and fat. Involuntarily her eyes sought the mirror at the end of the room. Her face was smooth as ever, pale with rice-powder, the eyes brightened with belladonna, enlarged with kohl. Her hair framed her cheeks in neat waves, black as well-water. No one could say she looked old, no man could. That little bitch had invented that. Very well. . . .

"I think you're rather hysterical, dear. Just give me that ring, and then you can go and lie down."

"I won't give you my ring. It's mine. He meant it only for me. Don't touch me." She screamed and ran from the room.



But he came that evening. He squatted down quietly by the door, smiled shyly at Kitti, took a cigarette from the silver jar she was handing round and whispered, "When are you going to dance?"

Kitti shook her head, pouting.

"You are going to dance, little one, aren't you?"

"She won't let me."

Bali saw them whispering, guessed and called out loudly, "Hurry up Kitti, you clumsy girl. The men over here haven't had anything at all yet, drinks or cigarettes. Come along child, even if you can't dance surely you can hand round cigarettes properly."

Kitti bit her lip and her eyes filled with tears. She looked piteously at her lover. He leant forward, patted her wrist and murmured, "Later."

When she had finished dancing Bali began making obvious advances to a young Parsi, who was at first bashful, ashamed because she must think him richer than he was. But she whispered in his ear and then sat back on her heels, smiling archly. He took her hand and kissed it gratefully.

Bali rose and stretched, yawning. "Ah well, it's late, isn't it?"

The men rose, and filed downstairs. But the Sayed remained sitting by the door. Bali pretended to notice him for the first time. He was only a boy. She put on her most affected manner.

"Any other night, Khan Saheb, but to-night ——" she patted her Parsi on the shoulder.

The Sayed smiled, flicked his cigarette out of the window and climbed to his feet.

"Kitti and I——" he began.

"Oh, Kitti? Well really, I don't know about her."

"I know all right," said the Sayed and laughed.

Bali turned on Kitti, "Well I can't think why you have got this boy to stay on. There's no room for him in the house."

"We'll go up to the attic."

"If he doesn't mind the attic he must be very accommodating."

"I'm a soldier. I don't mind where I sleep."

Bali shrugged her shoulders furiously, and strode into the next room.

In the attic he whispered to Kitti, "You must come away with me. You're not happy here. She'll do you some harm one of these days. I could see by the way she looked at you that she hates you."

"I can't think why—unless"—a laugh came in her throat—"unless because I told her what you had said about her being old and ugly."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Yes, that wasn't pleasant hearing for her."

"But she used to be always badgering me because no one liked me. And now somebody does," she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, "she hates me."

"Women are like that. She never realised she could be jealous of you, but she's suddenly jealous now. And, little one, when a woman like Bali is jealous it's safer to be out of the way. In this house you are at her mercy. Come away with me. I'm going back to the Punjab to-morrow. I'm on leave in Bombay. I've got to rejoin my regiment on the twentieth. We'll break our journey at my village. You'll come, won't you, Kitty, my lovely champak-flower?"

"I don't even know your name," she said.

"Ihsan, Sayed Ihsan-Ullah Shah."

"What a mouthful!"

"Just Ihsan."

"Ihsan," she whispered.



In the grey dawn the engines puffed and fumed under the vaults of Victoria Terminus. In the gaunt echoing waiting-rooms a few flat-coloured posters announced to the mob of illiterates (who swarmed through, tramping and shouting) "Visit Yorkshire" and "See England first." Taxis hooted incessantly, cabdrivers quarrelled with their passengers over the fare, or extolling the merits of their carriages abused each other wildly with upraised whips. Coolies

in khaki turbans banged tin trunks on to the platform, patted labels with grimy fingers, yelled directions to each other. Eurasian ticket collectors lounged against the platform-barriers, clipping the tickets very haughtily. The Punjab mail was full; trains in India always are. Ihsan and Kitti found seats wedged against the window in a narrow wooden bench. The station was full of noise and movement, whistles, voices re-echoing, clanging of trundling trucks. The train jolted forward, stopped, and then began to move slowly out of its smoky cavern towards the day. It was a bright morning outside. Tall yellow houses with green balconies, each with a blue-daubed pot of holy basil swinging from the balcony-rail and a parrot or bulbul in a painted cage. Clothes fluttered on the lines zigzagged high over the narrow streets, bright-patterned saris and silk-fringed turbans flapping in the wind. The train clanked over a bridge. Far below yawned the canyon of the street, sleek hoods of motors like gigantic beetles, shops with pyramids of brass and silver pots, vegetables piled in the road under gaily-striped awnings.

Santa Cruz and Bandra. Palms stirring along a silver strip of sand. Then the rolling, seaweed-coloured Konkan coastland. Coco-

palms and thatched brown cottages and layer upon layer of soaking rice-fields. The telegraph wires rose and fell, drooping in a trough and rising steeply to the next pole, and along every wire glittered companies of metallic-green bee-eaters, swaying and fluttering their wings in the sun. In the mud-pools buffaloes wallowed, their heads lucent with brown slime, their eyes blinking drowsily; snowy egrets perched on their backs to peck for ticks.

In the carriage it grew hot. Turbans were pushed back from foreheads, saris slipped from shoulders, bodices were loosened. A party of mendicants began to sing their *kirtans*, strumming on single-stringed guitars, clacking castanets. A gramophone wheezed, wearily, over an incessantly repeated record, "My lover is late. I can wait no longer. The autumn moon sinks among the palms and high overhead the wild geese are stirring at the rumour of dawn." People spat everywhere, urinated on the floor, waited in a queue for the single lavatory, which had never been cleaned, whose pipe had long ago been blocked and whose floor was ankle-deep in filth. An old *bania* seemed to be occupying the lavatory for an unconscionable time. They hammered on the door and, receiving no reply, burst the rusty lock to find the

old man dead, having fallen in a fit and suffocated, his face among the excrement.

Hotter and hotter. Flies buzzed about the windows, sand streamed in at every crevice, hung in a grey cloud and settled heavily, inescapably, upon everything. Sweating faces were masked with a film of dust. At each station everyone left the carriage for a drink at the single tap fixed to the outer wall of the waiting-room. It was strangely silent at those little remote stations, to ears now attuned to the rattle and clamour of the train. The passengers walked up and down the platform, their sandals scrunching on the hot gravel. The bare and ochre landscapes shimmered in the noon heat. Vultures and Brahminy kites wheeled slowly in the sky. The air was full of the metallic clicking and murmuring of countless insects. Perched on a telegraph-pole a crow cawed monotonously, meaninglessly. Then the engine whistled, everyone turned excitedly and scampered back to the carriages, laughing, pushing, shouting.

The afternoon faded to evening; and then it was dark. Sparks flew past the blue-black windows. Under the fitful shimmer of a blue-veined tongue of light faces were a faint blur, heads swayed drunkenly, bodies rocked, rolled

and recovered as the train roared northwards through the night.

And on the afternoon of the following day they were in the enormous plain of the Punjab. Fields of wheat bent under a fresh wind, cotton-fields were golden-brown in the soft evening light. At the corner of each field a Persian wheel was turning, the camel stumped blindfolded round and round, wooden wheels met, linked and parted, small earthen jars rose dripping from the well, tilted, pouring out freshets of leaping water, and rolled over back into moist darkness. Canals bordered with rich orchards, white mosques with façades of blue Persian tiles, towns of umber brick; and all round on every side the limitless expanse of wheat, cotton and wheat.

CHAPTER SIX

KITTI stood on tiptoe peering over the lattice-work of a window watching Ihsan ride off down the narrow village street. He was going out hawking as he did every afternoon. His favourite hawk, Mamolo he called her, swayed on his gloved hand, and his *bazdar* (falcon-keeper) rode beside him. Shading her eyes she gazed at Ihsan's figure so slim and youthful upon his little dappled pony, the silken fringe of his turban fluttering over his shoulder, until he turned the corner by the old giant banyan-tree. Then she turned back into the courtyard and, leaning against the dark moist trunk of the mango-tree that rose in the centre, remained dreaming in the sun. It was a pleasant place, the courtyard of the little house Ihsan had taken for her in his village for the remaining week of his leave. One door opened in the village street, one led to the women's quarters and one to the airy summerhouse-like building where Ihsan spent most of his time and could receive his own friends. On the fourth side of the courtyard was a balustrade of red brick, and beyond it the canal that fed the village crops.

The canal was shaded with a double line of trees in whose branches companies of wild peacocks gathered in the evening. Along the balustrade were four string cots and on each sat one of Ihsan's hunting-falcons, tied with coloured string to a leg of the cot, with little silver bells about their feet. The strange heraldic creatures sat very still, blinking enormous agate eyes in the sun.

Ihsan would not be back till late, she knew. There was a boar-baiting at the house of the Rais, the head-man of the village.



Ihsan rode down the winding dusty streets of the village, past the featureless, endlessly similar squat grey houses half hidden in the heavy trees, past the wrinkled yellow-faced *bantias* squatting on their doorsteps, arguing in their laborious whining voices, past the sweet-shops where mountains of rainbow-hued delicacies were misted by clouds of eddying flies, past the Mulla's school where the children sat in rows against the mud wall of the old mosque and chanted verses of the Quran, beating time with thin hands, while the old Mulla squatting opposite them swayed ecstatically, his pale eyes watering and his steel

spectacles all awry. Here was the house he had lived in as a child. He remembered his mother lying on her low string-bed, her scanty red-dyed hair splayed out over the pillow.

"How are you mother darling?"

"I'm better," the old woman muttered slowly but without conviction, "I haven't had so much pain to-day."

"Have you been taking those quinine pills?"

"Of course Ihsan, of course. . . ." But it was not true, as they afterwards found out, for she had hidden them under a loose brick in the kitchen, trusting to the little scroll of paper she wore round her neck whereon some verses of scripture were written by the hand of a holy Pir, whose agent had charged a large sum for the amulet, promising speedy release from all bodily ailments.

"So you really feel better?"

"Yes, Ihsan, but I keep worrying. If I die . . . you'll have no father, and you're a young boy still, only fifteen. And marry soon, dear boy, marry a woman from a good family, not one of these town-misses, who want to wear wrist-watches . . . wrist-watches!" She added, staring indignantly at the ceiling, and a thin trickle of saliva appeared at the corner of her

shrivelled mouth, "If only your father were alive . . . he was such a fine good man, so severe. . . ."

But she had died, and a concourse of uncles, enormous uncles with flowing beards and bristling *moustachios*, had promised to provide for Ihsan till he was of age, stipulating that he should then join the army as so many of his family had done.

He had a little money of his own now, one of the uncles had remembered him in his will, but he stayed on in the army for he liked the life and did not want to settle down in the country yet. Later on, a nice house and some fields, perhaps. . . .

He rode on over the wide, treeless meadows, rich with waving wheat and lucerne and golden with flowering *jhambo*. There were many quail running along like large, round brown mice in the furrows of the wheat-fields. They leaped up from almost under the horses' hoofs, and went skimming straight and low over the waving, shimmering corn. Mamolo, the falcon, flapped his wings and screamed, but the *bazdar* soothed him. "Quiet, foolish peacock, lovely jewel . . . wait, there will be a partridge soon." And presently a plump black partridge rose with a whirr like clockwork and bustled

squawking over the fields, the hawk streaking silently in pursuit.

When three partridges had been caught Ihsan told the *bazdar* to take Mamolo home, and he rode over to the bank of a river and squatted down in the soft grass and watched the colourless opaque water moving past, its surface broken with occasional dark-curving ripples where a sandbank or bed of tall water-weeds broke the even flow. Far away against the pale violet of the sky a line of butter-coloured hills caught the light of the declining sun. High overhead a company of wild geese went flapping languidly by, an arrowhead of russet and gold. The silence was broken only by the rare plop of a fish rising for the flies that spun in mazy clouds across the water, or the harsh cry of a peacock.

He rode slowly back towards the village. There was a brown pool by the roadside where cows stood motionless in the reedy mud and a few buffaloes wallowed ecstatically in the sluggish water, their bodies hidden and only their snouts visible. A small crowd from the village had collected and Ihsan reined in his horse for a moment and saw that some youngsters were practising wrestling under the direction of the negro Bilu who was the

village champion. A band, consisting of two drummers and a flute-player, was playing to encourage the wrestlers. In front of these musicians, and seemingly quite unconscious of the crowd, two aged and vastly obese negroes were dancing quietly by themselves, bobbing and advancing, bowing and retiring, and every now and then leaping heavily into the air with hoarse cries of primeval emotion. When the wrestlers became tired and lay panting on the ground, the negroes began to play the fool to amuse the crowd. They danced an ancient and obscene village dance which represented in dumb show the birth-pangs of a woman. One negro puffed himself out with a water-pot, the other aped the anxious husband. When the woman at length gave birth her progeny was found to be only a very old torn shoe. This disappointment filled the husband with fury and picking up the shoe he chased his wife all round the ring. The crowd howled with joy, and the young wrestlers leaped up to join in the pursuit.

All round them was the loveliness of the Indian evening. In fields of golden stubble mild grey cows, motionless save for an occasional drowsy swishing of the tail, stood knee-deep in rising mist. Camels were coming

home from grazing in the forest; their bells tolled with the muffled gong-note that was a pleasant contrast to the more metallic jangling of the cowbells. The world was bathed in a gentle yellow light. Beyond the fields a forest loomed opaque and mysterious, wreathed in eddying streamers of blue mist. Across the paling sky skeins of faint-pastelled clouds had been blown in wild patterns and left suspended there when the noon-day winds died away at the coming of the evening calm.

The village had already lost its hard outlines and faded to a shadowy blur from which came the unforgettable smell of India at evening, a smell that is compounded of the smoke of aromatic wood-fires, the bitter tang of burning dung-cakes and the acrid sense of dust, the inevitable all-enveloping dust that at the end of the day is in the very essence of the air descending in a soft invisible rain upon the exhausted earth.

Suddenly a drum beat from the direction of the forest, and a party of hunters came across the fields. Four men were bearing a deer strung on poles, the others carried long bamboo spears with flat heavy blades. Beside them ran their hunting-dogs, huge, half-wild tawny brutes with gaping jaws and ragged bloody coats. The men bearing the deer came on at a quick trot;

they were anxious to show their prize in the village. The creature's beautiful head lolled down over one man's back. The dogs had torn its throat open and the wound gaped horribly, discharging a tangle of gory flesh. The leader of the hunters had a small drum swinging upon his hip which he beat, now with the flat palms of his hands and now with the hard tips of his crooked fingers, as he chanted a paeon of triumph. He sang of the ardours of the hunt, the regal deer couching in the cool avenues of the forest, the epic endurance of the chase, the hounds with frothing jaws and straining muscles gaining upon the failing deer.

The light faded and changed to a soft chalky pink. The mist rose higher and the sky was an even powdery grey. A crescent moon hung low above the forest like an elfin ship afloat upon mounting waves of the mist. At some Hindu shrine in the village a conch bugled and gongs tolled for the evening prayer. The *banias* would be bringing their mighty offering of rice and butter to the temple; would wave a lamp before the eyes of the God to send him to sleep. The raucous nasal cry of the Muslim call to prayer rang out from the mosque; harsh, virile, positive, uncompromising, the Mullah's voice rose, and its ringing confident summons

drowned the melancholy appeal from the altar of Vishnu.



The courtyard of the Rais' house was a wide square without tree or furniture, the ground being covered with hard baked earth. Round the walls ran a narrow ledge four feet high, and in front of the main building was a high square dais on which the old Rais sat in state upon an English kitchen-chair with a spearman on either side. The ledge along the walls and the flat roofs of the long low buildings were crowded with spectators, and the Rais' servants had to clear a space for the petrol-lamps which were to be set at intervals along the wall. When Ihsan thrust his way in at the gate the servants fetched the only other English chair (but then Ihsan was a great favourite with the Rais) and set it near, but well to the rear of the Rais' seat. Ihsan embraced the old man, bending low and clasping him about the hips. The old man patted his shoulder, then laid his hand upon the chair beside him. Ihsan thanked him and sat down, his eyes shining. The Rais poked him in the ribs and said in a portentous whisper, "What about this Bombay girl they say you've got with you?"

Ihsan made a humorous grimace.

"Good stuff is she? Eh! Eh!" the old man laughed wheezily and made several obscene gestures and then leaning over nudged Ihsan with his elbow and winked very knowingly. "Eh! you young rascal. Your father was a gay dog and so are you. Heh! Heh!" Ihsan laughed politely.

A murmur of excitement ran through the crowd. They looked towards the Rais and then toward the door behind which they knew the pig was prisoned. Ihsan whispered to the Rais and the old man spoke to one of the spearmen beside him. The spearman grinned and shouted "Nimrud, O Nimrud! We are ready to begin." In answer to his cry the Rais' chief shikari appeared from behind the dais. He was wearing khaki shorts and khaki puttees and a strange tunic of white silk frogged with gold braid. With his bristling moustaches and furious glare he looked like a lion-tamer depicted in some facetious cartoon. He bowed to the Rais and turning to the crowd struck himself violently upon the chest, at the same time uttering a sharp yell. He then sprang down from the dais with exaggerated nimbleness and ran towards the door at the corner of the courtyard. There he stopped, and affecting an enormous caution bent

to listen. Then with a cry he flung open the door and darted back to safety on the dais. "Ooooh!" murmured the crowd, each man jostling his neighbour and craning forward to get a better view. But nothing happened. The dark square of the opened door gaped black and mysterious, but in the shade within there was no sound nor any movement. There was a mutter of disappointment and a few voices uttered taunts and curses to incite the pig to emerge.

"*Hut*, unfit degraded creature," they shouted, "were all your female ancestors blind and all your male ancestors cripples that they have produced such a revolting monster as you?"

But the pig bore with these reproaches and remained couched in his comfortable gloom.

The Rais told his shikari, "Nimrud, incite this cowardly abortion."

Nimrud shouted to the people to watch him. He untied his red turban and creeping along the wall cast the fringed cloth across the open door.

"Ah!" cried several voices in warning, for something stirred in the darkness.

Nimrud yelled "He comes!" and leapt for the dais.

A moment later the wild boar came cauti-

ously out, his great triangular head bent low, his hard blunt snout snuffling along in the dust. His little red eyes gleamed viciously.

He heard the murmur of the crowd rising and curving in the air above him. He looked about him, moving his enormous unwieldy head slowly from side to side, uneasy and afraid. There was nothing near, but in the distance a blurred wave of movement and mounting sinister sound. He sat down and leant his head against the wall and waited, motionless save for his little blinking eyes.

The crowd by the gate parted and the Rais' huntsmen, naked to the waist, came slowly in, holding back by great iron chains two enormous tawny dogs, who, straining forward, almost carried the huntsmen off their feet. When they saw the boar the dogs paused and the hair rose along their backs. Then they bared their teeth and snarled terribly. The Rais shouted to the huntsmen and the chains were loosed. The dogs bounded into the centre, and the boar, sensing rather than seeing the new danger, rose cumbrously to his feet.

The crowd shouted with delight and encouraged the dogs with every kind of yapping, growling, teasing, dog-worrying noise they could invent. A few men even threw little

clods of earth or handfuls of dry manure on to their backs to rouse them to fury.

Barking madly the dogs made little rushes forward, and then backed precipitately while the crowd yelled and shrieked round them. The boar waited motionless, his little red eyes peering warily, the curves of his tusks perilously evident. A man on the roof-top just above the pig let down the fringe of his turban a few inches in front of the pig's snout. There was a squeal of rage, a darting movement that almost defied vision, and the turban was torn away from the man's hand and lay coiled across the dust of the courtyard; and the boar was backing rapidly to his wall, still watching carefully the two dogs who barked and pranced just out of his reach, quivering and whining with excitement and terror, and goaded to frenzy by the fearful roar of the crowd.

"At him, dogs!" came the quavering voice of the old Rais; and Nimrud beat his uniformed chest and addressed a long ear-splitting torrent of abuse at both parties in the arena.

At last one of the dogs, perhaps growing more accustomed to the motionless figure of the boar and losing his first wild ecstasy of savage emotion, became more cunning, and, separating himself from his fellow, began to stalk the

boar by advancing cautiously along the wall. The boar's eyes blinked rapidly, he turned his uncouth primeval head heavily in the direction of this new assault, but apparently finding the other dog still snarling and barking ferociously more immediately alarming than the stealthy and silent figure on his right, he swung back his head again to face his frontal assailant. The enemy on the flank leapt forward, but the boar, with a lightning speed one could never have foretold from his former loutish clumsiness, swung round and charged, and the long wicked tusk tore the dog's side from ear to flank. With a howl of rage and pain the dog rolled over and his blood gushed out upon the dust. The crowd yelled its delight. With great head low, and hard square snout smeared fearfully with blood, the boar glared across the prostrate body in the direction of his other foe who now retreated slowly towards the gate whining and snarling, pursued by the reproaches and curses of the crowd.

Four more enormous curs were then led in, the boar shown to them, their chains loosed. The boar shambled back to the wall and between the combatants the body of the dying dog writhed in agony.

Cautiously the four new gladiators regarded

their prey. Cautiously they advanced in a line, their bushy tails erect, their spiny bodies quivering with excitement, their white fangs bared and flecks of foam along their lips. There was a scent of hot blood in the air, and the indefinable tang of torn and wounded flesh, and the smell of a wild forest beast and the roar and savage tumult of a crowd intent on slaughter. But the boar no longer awaited the attack. Flushed with his first easy victory he lumbered slowly out into the centre, then lowered his head and charged. He came on as though an irresistible avalanche drove behind that menacing head, thrusting, lunging forward like some Babylonian siege-machine. The nearest dog gave a shrill cry of terror and sprang backward to avoid the rushing doom; but in vain, for as he raised the fore part of his body in a wild despairing leap the sharp gleaming tusk caught at his stomach and ripped it open and his life came out in a welter of tangled guts.

"Ah," screamed the crowd, laughing and cheering. The Rais leaned back in his chair, and wiped his old eyes that had been watering with excitement, and patted Ihsan's shoulder. Ihsan sat erect and still, his teeth in a fixed smile, a hard set flush on his face.

Now the boar stood in the centre of the arena, a dead enemy on either side of him. He sniffed the terrible smell of the steaming blood and his eyes glared with demoniac fury and the lust to kill. He turned his great head slowly from side to side and the dogs shrank back at that frightful regard. More and more dogs were led in till they surrounded the boar with a circle of yapping, whining, barking, shivering enemies.

A dog behind the boar made an incautious movement, and in an instant the great head had swung round and lunged. But the charge missed and the dog sprang to safety. Then, as though to safeguard his rear after that triumphant sortie, the boar lumbered slowly back to the wall and sat down. The line of dogs followed him at a respectful distance, howling and snarling, but backing with terrified yells whenever he turned towards them.

The crowd became impatient, furious. Even the old Rais tapped his thin fingers briskly on the arm of his chair and shook his head disapprovingly. This incestuous boar was robbing them of their fun.

Then one of the spearmen at his side leant down and whispered in the Rais' ear and he smiled and nodded eagerly. The spearman

went to the edge of the dais and climbed up on the flat roof of the house, brushing aside with his spear the men crowding there. Now he was looking vertically down the wall against which the boar crouched. He measured the distance carefully with his long bamboo spear, then bending down he drove the heavy blade into the boar's leg, smashing its thigh and leaving the leg hanging by a few bloody shreds of torn flesh. The boar spun round squealing and drove his tusk into the soft mud of the wall. The crowd howled with delight; they laughed, embraced one another, flung their turbans into the arena, jeered and mocked the wretched pig, who must have been congratulating himself on winning and had now suffered such a rude set-back.

Somehow the dogs realised that their enemy had on a sudden become less formidable, that virtue had gone out of him. That menacing, motionless mask, with its baleful glare and the glinting scythes on either side of the snout, had changed to a wild creature crying with pain and dragging a broken leg behind as it shuffled along the wall. With a howl of triumph the line of dogs sprang forward. The boar hardly seemed to see them coming; he turned feebly and his tusks gashed a tawny shoulder—and they were on him, tearing his ears, his sides, his

back. He screamed a strangely human wail of agony and despair; and then for a moment his strength returned. He rose up, thrusting up his broad shoulders, shaking aside the clinging, gripping dogs. He swung himself to and fro, his red dripping snout in the air, and when he had freed himself he threw himself upon the nearest dog and gashed open its chest. The dogs drew back, their faces bathed in blood; but they were no longer afraid; they knew now the feel of their enemy's flesh. But the boar sank down against the wall and his eyes closed.

To revive him the men on the roof poured down water on his huddled body. The pig opened his eyes. He felt refreshed and soothed with the soft rain of water upon him. His little eyes gazed piteously up and his tongue licked the sweet liquid trickling down the wall. Somewhere in his poor muddled brain he must have had a sudden vision of the cool dark forest, moist with morning dew, the long shady avenues hung with pearly webs, where he and his fellows ran in single file—silent and hugely distorted in the morning mist—to a quiet pool to drink, or rooted in the red earth under old enormous trees. His head bowed gently to the ground and his eyes closed again.

The crowd fell into a frenzy of rage. They

hated the pig with violent personal hatred: coward, spoilsport, bastard, traitor! Did he mean to cheat them and end the game so soon?

Nimrud, superb in his liontamer's uniform, caught the crowd's attention with uplifted hand. When he had secured a respectful, curious silence he descended from the dais and walked slowly and magnificently towards the prostrate boar.

"Rise up, vile infidel," he began in sonorous tones, and kicked the boar violently in the ribs. The result was sudden and delightful. The boar leapt to his feet, Nimrud in astonished dismay turned to flee, stumbled, fell, and the boar's tusk ripped his leg from ankle to knee. The two spearmen sprang down from the dais, drove off the boar, and dragged Nimrud away to safety.

How the crowd laughed! It was the best joke they had ever enjoyed. They slapped each other's backs, they rolled about in ecstasies of mirth.

"Oh, Nimrud," they shouted. "Oh, what happened then? Have you a pain in the leg? Did you think the boar was dead when you were so brave? Oho, Nimrud, be careful in future of live animals!"

The old Rais leant back, weak with laughing, his whole body shaking with merriment. "Nim-

rud, eh Nimrud, you are a better clown than shikari," he gurgled, "I shall double your pay for that."

Meanwhile the boar, exhausted by his efforts, again sank down in the dust, and the dogs closed round him. Seeing that their enemy made no motion, but lay prone, they plucked up courage and bounded forward. One caught the boar by the throat, the others tore at his sides and at his stomach as he rolled over screaming. The dust rose up hiding the struggling, tearing, shrieking group from sight.



The boar-baiting had only lasted half an hour, but when the crowd broke up, each congratulating his neighbour on the amusing and delightful entertainment, it was already dark. A few *bantias* hurried past as the gate opened and discharged the crowd of vociferous Muslims. Turning their faces aside, the *bantias* hastened away from the place of slaughter. So might some timid Grecian merchants in Toulouse have shuddered with aesthetic loathing at the blood-sports of their Visigothic masters.

The *bantias* were on their way to the house of their Mukhi, the headman of the Hindu com-

munity in the village. There in the little courtyard, overshadowed by a vast pipal-tree whose crest of gleaming foliage was like a wet green dome, the Hindus of the village met every evening, to squat in a circle round the little shrine at the foot of the tree and to pay their homage to the image of the Monkey-God, whose face was daubed with yellow ochre and whose neck was adorned with a garland of green champak-blossom. A saffron-robed priest would read aloud the scriptures to them, expounding difficult passages with examples drawn from the everyday life of the village. He would read out the famous and splendid passage telling how the hero-king Rama, in the contest for his bride, bent a mighty bow that had defied the strength of all the Princes of India—and the old priest, blinking behind his heavy steel-rimmed spectacles, would wrinkle his yellow brow, bedaubed in brilliant scarlet with the trident of Vishnu, and chuckle: “You see in those days how strong we Hindus were, how our leaders were mighty men of war and ruled the heathen with a rod of iron. Now we have become feeble and a race of children and every man’s hand is against us; for the Aryan virtue has gone out of us, and our young men do nothing but smoke cigarettes and drink the liquors of the West.” And old Gopi-

chand the grocer would nudge his son and mutter: "Just you listen to that, Mulo, and if your mother's pleading can't break you of your love for cigarettes, let this holy man's advice sink into your mind." And Mulo would try and look defiant, for all that he was impressed by the priest's words. . . . Beside the priest sat the old Mukhi with his wrinkled, round red face, upon which an embroidered cap was perched, smiling benignly and happily upon the circle of his fellow Hindus. He loved to see them there each evening, to know that all respected and revered him, that he was the centre of all that curiously intense, secretive Hindu life. So they sat on under the giant pipal-tree that whispered mysteriously, incessantly, with its tinkling grey-green leaves, and the blue coils of smoke rising softly from the flat mud-houses all round hung like a soft bloom upon the night.

But the Mussulmans, with Ihsan at their head, swarming past from the Rais' house murmured "Hindus!" and spat.



While it was still light Kitti had finished grinding the corn in the vast primeval dish with a rounded stone—such was the primeval habit

of the villagers. It amused her to consider herself a village-woman and she had plunged eagerly into the little round of primitive house-keeping. She took a basket under her arm and, going to the cattle-pen behind the house, filled it with the fresh dung that littered the cobbled floor of the pen. When the basket was full she carried it round to the courtyard in front of the house, and squatting upon the ground took out handfuls of the hot moist dung and began to mould them into little flat cakes which she then plastered upon the wall to dry, to be used later for fuel. Soon the face of the wall was covered, as though with an ornamental pattern, with lines of brown dung-cakes, each marked clearly with the imprint of the fingers that had patted them into shape; and soon those wet-shining bronze circles faded to a dull grey, hardening into dusty uniformity with the old mud wall. The basket was now empty, and with a sigh of relief Kitti rubbed her hands in the warm dust of the courtyard and brushed off the flakes of dung with the fallen leaves that lay about beneath a mango-tree. Then she milked the cow (which they kept stabled in the common cattle-pen) and gave her a meal of cut-grass and til-seed plants. Setting out the little array of brass platters upon which Ihsan's meal was to be

served, she lit the fire in the enormous stone affair which looked like a neolithic altar but was in fact the oven, and began to prepare saffron rice, kabab cutlets and curry. It was lovely having her own house to look after and being able to prepare all the meals just as she liked best; Bali had hardly ever let her enter the kitchen in her house. She used to keep a drunken Bhaya cook with whom she quarrelled day and night; he often served up meals which were unfit to eat, but when Bali ordered him to go he would cry, and grovel on the ground, and presently Bali would cry too, and forgive him. Of course this was all after Mother's death, when the house gradually fell into chaos. But now she was able to worry herself delightfully over the exact flavour of a sauce or the proper snowy flakiness of the rice, wrinkling up her forehead and putting out the tip of her tongue as she bent anxiously above the simmering, steaming pots.

When Ihsan returned she was waiting for him at the door of the courtyard, and Ihsan told her to bring out a fire so that he could grill for himself the partridges his hawk Mamolo had caught. She brought a glowing pile of charcoal in a little rusty iron stove and set it at Ihsan's feet, and Ihsan grilled his partridge on a wooden skewer in the flame till the outer skin was brown and

crinkly; then he took the bird in both hands and, pulling it in two, began to tear off the red flesh with his strong white teeth, while a trickle of crimson juice ran down either side of his chin. Kitti stood in the shadow of the doorway, fascinated by the play of the firelight over Ihsan's square, bony face and the flash of his teeth and the tigerish hunger with which he tore and devoured the bird.

Kitti told him that dinner was waiting for him inside, the main dinner for which Ihsan's grilled partridge was but an appetiser. Ihsan answered with a cheery "Shabash!" and, taking off his coat, untying his sash and rolling his shirt-sleeves above the elbow, he went inside the house and seated himself at the bare wooden table on which were spread the fruits of Kitti's labour.

"This curry is good," Ihsan murmured with a gourmet's appreciation. "Yes, excellent, the flesh falls off the bones in white tender flakes at the first touch of one's hand."

Kitti thanked him demurely. She could not help noticing how sure of himself he was, how very different here in his own village from the silent admirer of Bombay. Though they had been here but a week she felt as if she had lived with him for years, almost as if she had been

his respectably married wife. He had soon lost his first ecstatic wonder at her beauty; he took it for granted now that she was always within his reach, and though at night in the stress of passion he murmured wild adulation in her ear, during the day he spoke almost casually to her. All this she noticed scarcely consciously, for she was still deeply grateful to him, the first man who had loved her; and her acquired courtesan's itch for extravagant admiration and varied affections had not rubbed the bloom from her gratitude.

He hardly thought of her as a person at all. He was a well-nourished animal of almost physical perfection. He had admired a girl and expressed his admiration with all the polish of Islamic courtesy. She had followed him home, she was his woman, she was beautiful and desirable and a good cook: he looked like being happy and comfortable with her. One day, perhaps—oh but there was no need to bother about the future (he yawned and stretched luxuriously)—but one day perhaps, if she were always pleasing to him, he might marry her. And he looked up at her and smiled his fascinating smile, and her face melted responsively. She came forward and sat on his knee.

Presently she asked him for some more money.

"What! That ten rupees all gone?"

"Yes."

"But—how on earth?"

She pouted and began swinging her legs. "I thought you loved me."

"I do, my rose-petal, but tell me—how could all that money have disappeared so quickly?"

"You haven't noticed my new shoes." She held up one leg stiffly to show a little blue-and-gold slipper. "Aren't they lovely?"

"They are. . . . That's what the ten rupees went on is it?"

"Yes," she leant forward and rubbed her lips against his ear. He wriggled delightedly. "You're not angry, are you?"

"Of course not, love." He felt in the pocket of his coat and gave her another note. "At the same time, darling, you must be a *little* careful you know. I'm not a rich man. I've only got a small amount besides my pay."

She looked at him mischievously. These men, always mean, Bali had said so. Of course he was rich. Hadn't he given her a wad of notes that first night? He must have heaps of money. But still, she'd got another note now; there was no need to argue.

"Of course, darling," she snuggled up close to him and Ihsan felt pleased at his victory. Always a ticklish job, the first dispute about money. "We shall have to live very quietly when I rejoin my regiment. I took a loan from a *bania* in order to go to Bombay and I have to pay that back in monthly instalments."

"Yes dear," she smiled. But what nonsense he was talking; you could see from his clothes and the way he'd hired one of the best houses in the village that he was comfortably off. She rubbed her mouth against his cheek and whispered, "We needn't worry about what we'll have to live on in the future till the future comes, need we?"

When Ihsan fell asleep Kitti lay on her back staring up at the ceiling. How quiet it was! There was not a sound but the clicking of lizards in the thatched roof. At first she had missed the noises of a city, the trams and motor-cars and the horse-carriages with their silver bells. Here in the country the silence was broken by the howling of dogs behind the thornbush ramparts of stockaded villages, and the sudden unearthly cry of a hyaena. But then she turned and felt the warmth of Ihsan's body against her own and was happy. No one could despise her now; she was admired and

loved by one who was almost godlike in beauty. She had never thought for a moment about religion but she had lived long in a house of which the appearance was Hindu; and when she looked at Ihsan she often thought of a coloured print of Krishna, the great lover, at the head of the staircase in Bali's house—Krishna as a child, having the strength and beauty of a man but a lurking roguishness in his dimpled cheeks, the suspicion of a pout in his full lips. Ihsan looked just like that when she was coaxing him out of a fit of sulks.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KHODABAD was divided into two utterly dissimilar halves. First there was the old town, which dated back to the days when the Moghul Governors held their court in the citadel and were buried in the great blue-domed mausoleum on the summit of the hill along whose flanks straggled the main bazar. The tombs of those old noblemen were fallen into ruin now, the lovely Persian tiles were cracked and discoloured, silver leaf peeled off old doors, and on the sepulchres the embroideries were tattered and stained with bird-droppings. Great yellow boulders heaped in wild disarray about the crest of the hill; a few bent and stunted thornbushes; stealthy vultures, bald and livid-plumed, sidling between the rocks in search of dung, and the great tombs tall and noble in that deserted place, still marvellous in grace of line and colour of painted tiles lifting swelling domes under an empty sky.

The houses of the city were mostly fallen into a like decline. You saw old palaces empty and silent, houses whose façade had fallen, revealing all the front rooms, broken columns and

carvings worn and defaced. And sitting by the fountain in the gardens of the mosque the elders of the town, stroking white silken beard or trickling from finger to finger the sleek-running amber prayer-beads, nodded and sighed and exchanged stories of the past, quoting passages from the poets to approve their resignation, that all things fade and fall, love and faith and life.

The other half of the city was the Military Cantonment; and what a change! Dozens of neat little bungalows, each with its garden gay with geranium and rose-bed, each with a little box for visiting cards affixed to the garden-gate, each with a wide verandah with ferns hanging in complicated wire baskets. These were the officers' bungalows. Further on were smaller boxlike houses for married sergeants. And then, across a dusty parade-ground, were the lines of the Indian troops, long grey-stone single-storey buildings, divided at regular intervals by a high wall surrounding a small courtyard in which the wife might take the air secure from the curious gaze of the world.

And in one of these two-roomed quarters Kitti sat awaiting Ihsan's return from drill. She had prepared his midday meal. Not much worth preparing, she thought scornfully, looking at the little aluminium platter with spiced

potatoes and the bowl of curds. But Ihsan was so set on economy nowadays. They had had a quarrel only yesterday when he had told her that the vegetables were very tasteless and she had answered "What can you expect, considering what you give me to manage with? It's hardly worth my while bothering to cook you things at all. You give me hardly anything, and then when I do my best to make you nice dishes you complain they're tasteless. Tasteless? Of course they're tasteless, I haven't got any spices in the house. I ought to have cloves and cardamum and supari and chillies, but I haven't. I've only got enough money left till the end of the month to buy the barest necessities."

"I give you all I can afford," Ihsan said sullenly. "I'm not rich."

Kitti had no idea of the value of money or how to eke out her allowance as a clever housewife would have done. In Bali's house there was always profusion and reckless expenditure. Somehow money was always found when it was needed. Men always had plenty of money and women had that for which a man always cheerfully paid. And then Ihsan had seemed such a lordly admirer at first. If he was so poor, why had he given her that packet of notes straight

away—and indeed that was a question Ihsan now began to ask himself. He had taken a loan from one of the Khodabad *banias* at exorbitant interest for his trip to Bombay, and now it was all gone; and every month when he went to get his pay the *bania* waited outside the military treasury, and with many bows, obsequious smiles, wrinkling up his yellow little face, reminded the illustrious Ihsan Shah that he owed this poor wretched slave one-third of his pay as monthly instalment for the repayment of the loan.

Another thing that irked Kitti was the convention of purdah. Ihsan had pretended that they were properly married and so Kitti had to observe the customs of a Mussulman wife. In Bombay she had been used to wander in the streets whenever she wanted to and the thronged bazars and bright cafés had been a constant joy to her. Now she had to sit all day in two small square rooms with glazed windows, and her only recreation was to walk round and round the tiny courtyard. And how hot it was! She was accustomed to the steaming heat of Bombay, but this was something different. With May began the fierce summer of the North, its dust-storms and tearing hot winds that seemed to scorch and sear your face. You did not

sweat much but your skin became hard and rough, swelled and became puffy like a lizard's. She stood at the window seeing dimly through the glazed glass the white glare of the parade-ground. Hotter and hotter it grew. There was no release. It was only noon now and all afternoon the hot wind would blow, and even when the sun set and the wind sank there would come an airless hush in which clouds of mosquitoes whined and sang about her head, teasing her till her hands grew weary of warding them off, and in despair she would try to ignore them, and they would settle on her face and neck and hands, so that in the morning she would be covered with their little wounds.

. . . Ah, there at last was Ihsan. She heard his voice and then his footsteps. He was talking and laughing with someone. Must be that new friend of his, Sebuktagin Khan. She had noticed him once before, a fine young Pathan, not so handsome as Ihsan but with the sensuous grace of his nation, the thick soft feminine lips and the pale eyes fringed by heavy black lashes. She heard Ihsan's fingers fumble with the door-latch. His friend said something and Ihsan laughed—oh, his laugh stirred her, made her smile and draw sudden breath. And then he came in. He was no longer in the fine clothes

that he wore in Bombay and in his village, for he had to wear the regulation white trousers, white shirt, white turban and black jacket. She heard his friend's voice bidding him good-bye, "Khoda-hafiz!", and he called back the same words over his shoulder, shut the door behind him, drew off his turban and with an "Ouf!" of relief swung his thick mop of hair to and fro.

"It was hot on parade this morning" he told Kitti, "I hope you've got something nice for me."

She smiled and nodded, ran to the little fireplace between three smoke-blackened bricks and took off the plate of *chapattis* that had been left there to keep warm. They smell good anyway, she thought, and began poking the brown flat maize-cakes with her thumb, nodding contentedly to find that they were crisp on the surface and soft underneath.

"*Chapattis*, and spiced potatoes and curds! That's a fine meal," said Ihsan, and she felt grateful to him for that, realising that he was making amends for their quarrel of the day before.

He squatted down, drew the platter of *chapattis* towards him, broke off a large piece and crushed it into his mouth. "Um!" with mouth full he nodded appreciatively, lifted up the little

bowl of curds and tilting his head back drank very slowly, smacking his lips noisily between each mouthful. "And now for the potatoes"; he reached forward and scooped out a handful. "I must say you do cook well, Kitti. It's a shame that I can't afford to let you have more money to spend. Oh well, I shall, one day. Once I've paid back this *bania* his damned loan. And then I might get promoted. I'm sure all my officers like me. They always compliment me on my turn-out and general smartness. It's only that Risaldar-Major Maqbool (may asses defile his grandmother) who's got a grudge against me, I'm sure I don't know why. But for him, I'm certain I'd have got promoted long before now. He's probably jealous of my appearance, he's so small and black no woman would look twice at him."

I wonder, thought Kitti; a Risaldar-Major's pay must be very good. "That must be it."

"Oh yes, that's the reason. And that wart on his cheek, eh? What a sight!"

"There are some more potatoes."

"No, no more for me. I must not eat too much or I can't sleep it off in the afternoon and I've got a musketry practice in the evening. By the way, have you washed my shirt for me?"

Her heart stood still; she'd forgotten, though

he had reminded her as he left the house that very morning.

"What shirt?" she stammered.

Ihsan sprang to his feet. "What d'you mean *what shirt?* I told you to wash my other white shirt! I told you twice; have you washed it or not?"

"Ihsan I——" she backed against the wall.

He began to shout. "Do you ever do anything I ask you, you little bitch?" He seized her by the wrist. "Do you? Do you? Answer me, can't you?"

"I forgot, oh . . ." she began to whimper with fright.

He stormed at her, his face close to hers. "Forgot! forgot! you little fool, you need a good thrashing. Then perhaps you'd try and remember. A good thrashing, d'you hear?"

She lifted her free arm to ward off his violence. With a grunt of disgust he loosed her wrist and threw her hand from him. He went on in a lower, grumbling tone, "You always complain you've got nothing to do and tell me how in Bombay every minute of the day was occupied and so you never had time to get bored, and then when I ask you to do something for me, quite a simple easy thing that any woman would be glad to do for her man——"

He looked like a sulky child with his pouting mouth and the delicious wrinkles between his knitted brows.

Kitti cried, "Oh, stop, stop, Ihsan. You know I would have been glad to do it for you, to do anything for you. I just forgot. Anyone can forget things. Don't be angry with me," and she flung herself at his feet.

He stood motionless for a moment, hesitating, uncertain, his anger vanishing at her sudden submission—usually she argued, sulkily. She lay unstirring. She had been very frightened at first. She had never seen anyone so angry and thought he would strike her and she was terrified of pain. But as she lay there she realised that he would not harm her now. And already her mood gave way to one of irritation. After all, what a fuss about a shirt. How absurd men are, attaching so much importance to the most trivial things. Then she heard Ihsan sigh and she looked up. Her face was still tearstained from her first terrified weeping and she looked the picture of woe. He bent down and patted her shoulder. She kissed his hand and sat up, he never noticing how composed and deliberate her movements were now.

He sat down on a packing-case against the wall and said dully, "I'm sorry Kitti. . . .

Never mind . . . I'll wear this morning's shirt again."

"No," she said, "I think there's time to wash the other. It's a hot afternoon and it'll dry quickly in the sun."

"Thank you. . . . I didn't frighten you did I?"

"You did indeed," she said firmly, and then venturesome, added, "if you treat me badly I shall run away."

He looked up startled, suddenly realising what she meant to him in spite of her tiresome ways; she could see the fear in his eyes and felt very pleased. Her threat had been, of course, a bluff. She had no money to return to Bombay, and even if she had she couldn't face Bali. She could hear her sneering "So your friend soon tired of you and you come creeping home like the whipped pariah bitch you are." And here in the Punjab how could she live? She knew no one, no courtesan's house where she could find employment, the streets would be her only refuge. But she realised from Ihsan's sudden change of mood how much he still cared for her and she meant to pursue her advantage.

"Oh, you wouldn't do that Kitti? Ah, what a dreadful thing to say," and leaning forward he took her by the hand and drew her towards him, and seating her on his knee he began to

kiss her feverishly, calling her "Rose-petal, heart of my heart, life of my life," just as he had done on their first night together.

Then he took her face between his hands and looking gravely at her asked "You didn't mean that did you, darling?"

She pushed his hands down and leaning forward put her cheek against his and murmured in his ear. "Of course not Ihsan. But, you see, you must be gentle with me. After all I'm not accustomed to housekeeping, all the bother and hard work of it. I had a very easy life in Bombay, servants to wait on me all day." She began to draw a wonderful picture of her comfortable, luxurious life there, quite forgetting that when she first met Ihsan she had told him that Bali was dreadfully cruel to her and never gave her enough to eat. Ihsan, soothed by the murmur of her soft lips at his ear, was equally forgetful. "And everything is so different here" she ended sadly.

"I know, my love" Ihsan cried impulsively. "And you have tried to make the best of it. You have been very patient and brave, and I have been thoughtless and selfish and unkind."

She sat back balancing like a child on his knee and looked at him mischievously.

"So you're not cross with me any more?"

"Of course not."

She put her forefinger on the tip of his nose and pressed it in till the yielding flesh was white all round her finger. Then she gave a little giggle and flung herself upon him. Presently she whispered, "Don't get cross with me again if I ask you something."

"No."

"Could you give me just two more rupees to manage with till the end of the month?"

"Oh, Kitti darling, I would love to, but I simply haven't got the money."

Nonsense, she thought to herself. He must be keeping back some money for his cigarettes and *pan*-leaves.

"Not even one rupee?"

"Darling, don't keep on asking me. It's so dreadful having to refuse. If I had it I'd give it to you, you know I would."

"You couldn't get it from anyone?" He was looking so miserable that she stopped and said in her most motherly voice, "Never mind. I shouldn't keep on worrying you like this. I know how bad for a husband's nerves it is when his wife is always at him about something or other." She sighed. "But it is hard trying to manage on so little."

"I *know*, my darling, and I wish, oh I wish . . ."

"It seems absurd the way some people have money and others don't, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Think of that ridiculous old woman who brings us our milk in the mornings. She and her husband must have made a fortune, they've got the contract for supplying all this barracks with milk. And what good does it do her? She's so mean she won't even employ a servant to take round the rations of milk but must do it herself. And how ugly she is. Much uglier than your Risaldar-Major Maqbool, in spite of his wart," she laughed gaily. "And then the silly old thing tries to improve her looks by wearing all those gold necklaces. They must be worth quite a lot of money. And on that black wrinkled neck like a decaying crocodile's they're simply wasted." She let her hand stray negligently to her own neck and then sighed.

Ihsan nodded. "That's fate. Everything's fate."

"Oh you Mussulmans!" Kitti said brightly (she still spoke of herself as a Hindu, since they had never been properly married). "It's always fate, fate, fate."

"Well?"

"Think what a difference it would make to

us. . . . And after all she'll never really miss it. . . ."

"What d'you mean? . . ."

She smiled into his face and then kissed him full on the lips. He felt her tongue, and hugged her convulsively. They rolled over on the floor and lay enlaced.



The following day was Mohurrum, the day of mourning for the martyr Hussein. The town was early astir. People awoke from an unquiet night, from dreams disturbed by incessant drums, the rolling of great gongs swinging upon their leather thongs, clashing and moaning under the blows of the musicians, and the furious patter of kettledrums. Small bands of devotees went about the city with flute and drum summoning the people to prayer, to wail and mourn for the martyred saint, to cry "Ya Hussein! Ya Hussein!" to beat the breast and cast dust upon the head. Outside the mosques the *tabuts* stood ready, huge towers covered with tinsel and silver paper to represent the tombs of the martyrs. Already before each *tabut* the dervishes with long shirts and snaky locks were whirling round in ecstatic dance, flogging themselves with chains and repeating the Names of God. Youths came

disguised as tigers, naked and painted with stripes of yellow and black and adorned with long tails of silver paper. They joined the dance before the *tabuts*. The streets were full of silent expectant crowds all dressed in black. The shops were shut, the drink-shops closed by Government Order and guarded with police, and the people wandered to and fro vaguely, restlessly, with the dull and sullen murmur of a crowd swayed with excitement and fear. There was savagery and hysteria in the air; the thudding drums and wailing of dervishes and the stamp-stamp-stamp of falling feet, beating out the rhythm of the dance, set men's nerves on edge and pricked them with the spur of primal emotions. In the narrow alleys of the city, under the tattered awnings of the bazar, down crumbling tunnels and old archways blew a wind of madness. The old men who dreamed and gossiped and rattled rosaries on their doorsteps started up, their mouths agape, their eyes fanatically ablaze as though they saw before them the bleeding body of the martyr, lifted hands to heaven crying for vengeance, shouted hoarsely "Ya Hussein! Ya Hussein!" The suspense grew and grew, dervishes fell screaming and frothing in epileptic fits, flagellants rolled over in the dust exhausted with their wounds;

and the drums never ceased their fearful clamour, but mounting, mounting, toward evening thudded faster and ever faster, like feverish heart-beats of the troubled city. And in the twilight, when the tombs of the old Emirs were dim and blank against the white sky, the dervishes yoked themselves to the *tabuts*, drums roared in final triumph, trumpets blared and men shouted ecstatically, waving lamps, prostrating themselves, tearing their clothes and casting dust on their heads. And slowly the *tabuts* jerked into motion, streamers fluttered, tinsel and silver paper glittered in the torchlight, and the great towers rolled heavily out into the main street. "Ya Hussein! Ya Hussein!" the shout rose vehement and savage, a new intensity in the wild voices. For there on a platform of each tower was a small dome, a symbol of the sepulchre at Kerbela where the martyr lies entombed; and men thought of Hussein falling under a rain of arrows in the desert, ringed round with pitiless enemies. Slowly the *tabuts* advanced, down a lane of bowing, yelling, sobbing devotees between dust-pasted faces illuminated fitfully by leaping torches—faces distorted with passion, lined with tears, between hedges of hands raised to heaven, clenched fists and straining muscles. And in

front of the *tabuts* the dervishes, their bronze backs sleekly gleaming, bowed over the creaking ropes, groaned and gasped and sobbed encouragements to each other as they stumbled heavily forward, dragging the vast burden of the towers; and between the ropes the dancers jigged like marionettes, and the bloody whips of the flagellants rose and fell. Slowly, slowly, as though the whole heart of the city strained behind them the *tabuts* rolled forward; their summits were lost in darkness, the sheets of tinsel fluttered and quivered, the Shirazi carpets swayed majestically like the trappings of an elephant.

And then suddenly the head of the procession stopped. People closed up behind, heads were strained this side and that. . . . What is it? what is it? . . . The *tabuts* jerked and stopped, the ropes slackened, the dervishes raised their sweat-streaming faces and cried out demanding what had halted the procession. Under the flaring acetylene-lamp at the cross-roads a woman, her hands at her neck, was gasping out her story.



“Did you get it?” asked Kittie.

Ihsan shut the door behind him, locked it care-

fully, drew a deep breath, flung his turban into a corner of the room and threw back his hair. He was trembling, his eyes wide and frightened. There was only one small lamp in the room round which mosquitoes whined and hummed, but Kitti could see the staring whites of his eyes.

"Did you get it?"

Ihsan shook his head, still staring blankly before him. She felt a sudden urge of contempt for him. He, the boasting Sayed, scared by an old woman. He'd set out full of the idea, congratulating her on her suggestion, and now back he came, frightened as a child, the corner of his thick mouth quivering as though he were going to burst into tears.

"Why not?" she demanded angrily.

"Oh hold your tongue, can't you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I've got some curds ready if you'd like them."

He seized the bowl and drained it, wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Well, she thought, he never asks if there's any left for me! Lucky I kept some for myself.

"It was a mad idea," said Ihsan. "I was insane to listen to you." He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. "It was mad to think of robbing that old woman. If she walks

about so openly with that coin-necklace it's because she is confident of her safety, because she takes every precaution. But I couldn't think of anything but you, and how I must get some money for you; and you suggested this way to me and I was so bewitched I couldn't think reasonably."

"That's right, put all the blame on me. What did I want more money for? To make this house at least decent. And isn't that for yourself as well as me? Of course, if you like to live like a pig of a *bania*," she shrugged her shoulders.

But he went on as though he hadn't heard her. "I never thought it out or anything. I waited for her in the street that leads from the barracks to the main road of the city. It was quite dark and deserted. I took off my turban and waited. Then she came, hurrying along. I got ready to throw my turban over her neck. But she saw me waiting at the corner. She stopped and turned. Perhaps I was standing too still. On Mohurru night everyone runs, cries, shouts. . . . She turned and went back quickly. I followed and she began to scream. I was afraid at that. She ran shrieking down the long echoing alley. Then I realised the houses would be empty, their inhabitants gone

to the procession. But it was too late. She had plunged into a side street that led out into the main road where the procession was. Through the low arch at the end I could see the lights and moving figures. I could never catch her up in time. And then I fell into a terrible rage with the old woman. I screamed insults after her."

"And what was the good of that?"

Ihsan shook his head. "No good at all. On the contrary very foolish, for she realised from my cries that it was her necklace I was after. I shouted out all the things you had said about a hideous old thing like her presuming to wear ornaments." He smiled wryly, apologetically almost, at Kittie.

She sighed impatiently, sat down heavily.

"If you hadn't been so scared at her first screams you'd have got her."

"All very well to say that. If you'd heard those screams echoing down that alley you'd have thought they'd have awoken the world."

"Well. . . . Have you thought of anything else?"

"No, Kittie. And now I must tell you something. I'm sorry I brought you from Bombay. Perhaps I made out I was a rich man, but I thought you loved me. You told me how

miserable you were with Bali, and when I asked you to come away with me you seemed so wonderfully happy——”

“I didn’t know we were going to live in a hovel like this.”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry Kitti. I wanted you, anyhow; and I didn’t care if I did give you a false impression about my position——”

“And then in your village—we had decent quarters there. . . .”

“That house belonged to the old Rais. He let me have it for a song. And I still had a little money left over from the *bania*’s loan. Now I have none. I’ve even had to sell my hawks.”

“Hawks!” muttered Kitti.

“Well, I loved them. They meant a lot to me. . . . And now, you see how it is. I’m a poor man and we shall have to live very economically. If you don’t like the idea—well, I won’t keep you, if you’d like to go somewhere else.”

He knows he’s trapped me there, she said to herself. He knows that I’ve nowhere to go, that I’m helpless.

“You coward,” she said slowly.

“Coward? what d’you mean?”

“Yes, I mean coward, coward, coward!” her voice rose shrilly. “Frightened of an old woman. Frightened! Oh, the noble, brave

Sayed, an old woman cries out and he trembles and goes all weak with fear. Ah! Ah! Ah!" she broke into a horrible screaming laugh.

"Stop that," said Ihsan very quietly. But she was hysterical. She pointed at him and shrieked with laughter, crying out "Coward! Coward and son of a coward!"

He took off his shoe deliberately and struck her across the mouth. A thin trickle of blood ran between her lips.

She stared at him, her voice dead in her throat. For a second they stood rigid as statues, opposite one another. Then in a voice choking with rage she began gabbling, "Coward! When there's no one to help me, you can be very brave can't you? But when an old woman in the street——"

"Oh stop it, can't you?" he shouted.

"Didn't dare touch the old woman. Pah! You coward. Well, there can't be many fellows so cowardly. Your friend Sebuktagin wouldn't have been such a coward. . . ."

"What!" he caught her by the wrist. "What d'you know about Sebuktagin? What? Answer me!" He raised the shoe again.

"Oh, nothing, except that he's a finer man than you."

He took her by the throat. "Now tell me or

I'll kill you." He spoke through clenched teeth. "Have you spoken with Sebuktagin?"

"Yes I have," she cried. His fingers closed tighter and she choked.

"You whore," he said, and lifting his shoe struck her again and again till she crumpled up and fell screaming on the floor.



Sebuktagin, my friend Sebuktagin. It can't be true. He lifted his face to the stars. Oh, say that it isn't true. That bitch invented it. That bitch. . . . Though he had closed the door of his room behind him, he could still hear her snuffling.

Slowly he walked out into the night. Here are Sebuktagin's quarters. If he admits it, what shall I do? But he couldn't admit; he'll shuffle and turn pale, deny it; but I'll always suspect him. Sebuktagin my friend. He lifted the latch. The door was open.

In the light of a small lamp Sebuktagin, squatting on the ground, was reading the Quran-Sherif, murmuring the sacred verses aloud, swaying to the rhythm of its holy music. His profile hard against the lamp was clean and noble, his long soft hair shone brown. And

Ihsan knew that Kitti's accusation was false. He leant against the doorpost watching his friend, seeing as though for the first time the beauty of his mouth and the sweep of his long eyelashes.

Sebuktagin marked the page he was reading with a strip of embroidered silk, closed the book, kissed it, wrapped it in a square of cloth of gold and laid it on a shelf. Then he noticed Ihsan, whom he had not heard come in.

"God keep you," he said, smiling. "Is there anything you want, my brother?"

Ihsan stood silent for a moment longer and then burst into tears. Sebuktagin stood up, put his arm around him, and Ihsan's proud straight body crumpled and leaned helplessly upon his friend. In the curious dualism of a Pathan's nature a feminine weakness and gentle despair lies very close behind the swaggering cruel male.

"She is a devil, that girl," Ihsan gasped.

Sebuktagin made no comment, for it would have been gross discourtesy to show any interest in even the closest friend's women-folk.

They sat down on the floor side by side, shoulders touching, and Ihsan told Sebuktagin how Kitti had first incited him to rob the old milk-woman and then, in a fit of temper, had

tried to embroil him with his friend. Sebuktagin nodded gravely.

"I can't keep her any longer," Ihsan said. "What can we do with her? If I drive her out she will file cases against me before a magistrate, she will hang about my quarters and put me to shame."

Sebuktagin thought for a while and then said, "We could sell her, of course. They are always willing to buy girls across the frontier."

Ihsan nodded. "But how can we do that?"

"Oh, I'll see to everything. A friend of mine in the town, the old *pan*-seller by the Pearl Mosque, has a younger brother who's in that trade. A file of camels, the frontier guards bribed, and no more trouble."

"But I mustn't see that woman again. If I do she'll win me over. She is a devil, but she is so beautiful."

"No, I can arrange, and you'll live here. Look, I must just finish cleaning my uniform. Will you help me?"

With heads bowed over their work, lean faces outlined against the yellow lamp, they polished the buttons, rubbed the leather belt, rolled the puttees. When they had finished they hung the coat and trousers on a wooden peg sticking out crookedly from the mouldering wall.

Sebuktagin yawned. "I'm sleepy Ihsan." He spread a rug on the floor. Ihsan took off his turban and lay down, Sebuktagin settling himself beside him, and turning down the lamp. Ihsan was grateful and happy to feel his friend's arm slip affectionately round him. It gave him a feeling of comradeship and safety.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KITTI started up out of her sleep—was that someone at the door? Yes, the bolt rattled again. She turned up the lamp, trembling. The latch on the door rose and fell and her heart stopped. Who could it be at that hour of night? Why, Ihsan of course. She had not seen him for a couple of days now. He must have suddenly decided to return to her. He was bound to, of course. With a breathless little laugh she called out,

“Is that you, Ihsan?”

There was no answer, but the latch clattered again. Silly boy, did he think she left the door unlocked when she was alone at night? . . .

“Wait a minute,” she called out and turned the rusty key.

Sebuktagin, the lower part of his face muffled in a fold of his turban, stepped quickly in.

“Are you ready to leave at once?” he asked. “Ihsan asked me to fetch you. The police are making enquiries about the milk-woman’s assailant.”

“But . . . but . . .” she backed against the wall, “but he told me he never even touched her.”

"Oh, she's spun a long story to the police, and she said she recognised the man as a sepoy. Ihsan's going back to the village to-night. He didn't dare return to barracks in case the police were watching for him."

"I suppose I'd better come" she murmured doubtfully. She asked him a few more questions and presently agreed to go with him. What else could she have done? She packed her few belongings in a small square sheet of printed cloth, knotted the ends, and swung the little parcel over her shoulder. .

"Have we got far to go?" she asked, and when Sebuktagin nodded she slipped off her new shoes (they had a bright woollen pompom at each toe) and carried them in her hand.

They crossed the city quickly, for the streets were empty. Only at the cross-roads an occasional posse of police lounged, leaning on iron-shod staves. Pariah-dogs, nosing amid heaps of refuse, scuttled away with yelps of fear at the sound of their footsteps. Little red lamps quivered before Hindu shrines. Muffled drums throbbed dully and the reedy voice of a flute sobbed from a distant shrine. The echoes of the Mohurruum hysteria died away in sad quartertones.

In a shadow of a palm-grove on the outskirts

of the city a camel was kneeling, chewing contentedly a bundle of til-seed plants. As soon as it heard footsteps it began to snarl, as all camels do at the intimation of work. In the darkness the flash of its bared teeth was visible and as they came nearer they caught the foetor of its breath. The serpentine neck eddied, the small ears were flattened back like a cat's, the mouth bubbled and frothed with rage, a green slime edging the grey-whiskered lips. Sebuktagin bent and caught the leading rope. The camel's head reared away from him; the creature snarled and roared ferociously. He leaned over and struck it savagely with his stick, he shouted words of abuse reflecting on the morals of all the camel's ancestors, he began to dance with rage and struck the creature again and again in the face. The camel's rage was simulated and so was Sebuktagin's; this is the ritual that a mettlesome camel and his driver follow unwaveringly. When the camel's clamour had died away to a complaining rumble, Sebuktagin motioned to Kitti to mount. There was a double saddle. Kitti sat in front, and Sebuktagin, drawing the two ends of the leading rope one on each side of her waist, threw his leg over and settled himself into the seat behind. Instantly without waiting for Sebuktagin's cry of

"Aa! Aa!" the camel reared up, hind-legs first and then fore-legs, and bucking gently just to show its independence, swung out across the wide plain.

It was a moonless night, but in the faint starlight the grey sand and black, crouching bushes were visible. The sky circled above, enormous, the metallic glitter of its huge stars undimmed by mist or any cloud.

Kitti was exhilarated by the quick motion of the camel. Perched up on the carpets and quilts that were spread over the saddle she felt herself sailing through the darkness. The black outline of the camel's head, bobbing rhythmically and evenly, was like the curved prow of a boat—one of those fishing-canoes she had seen breasting the breakers of the monsoon along the Bombay coast. The camel's velvet-padded feet fell softly on the soft earth, scooping up little white puffs of sand at each footfall. The silken tassels of the carpets on the camel's back swung to and fro like silent bells.

They passed many sleeping hamlets. The smoke rose up in black spirals from the straw roofs of the little flat cottages. Each hamlet was surrounded by a rampart of dried thorn-bushes closely wedged together and piled higher than a house. As soon as the camel approached,

the village dogs awoke and began to bark furiously, howling and choking with fear and excitement at the sound of a stranger in the night. Sometimes a voice would hail them from within the wall of thornbushes, "Is all well?" And Sebuktagin would answer "All is well" and then the voice would reply, "Allah salamat rakhe. God keep you in His charge." And the householder, convinced that it was a false alarm, would beat his dogs to silence them. At the first thwack all the other dogs would howl in sympathy, and dogs from other hamlets far away would suddenly hear the howls and set up their own clamour.

At length Sebuktagin began to tighten the camel's bridle. They slowed up and went forward at a slow walking pace till they came to a copse of tamarisk. It was an old burial-ground. A few coloured tiles lay about, and some crumbling mounds of grey earth marked the site of former tombs. In the centre four carved columns supported a broken dome. Evidently a person of consequence had been buried there. Perhaps the chief of the tribe whose burial-place this was. After his death the tribe had probably broken up and drifted vaguely away. On the far side of the copse was an old ruined caravanserai, built in the days before railways, to

accommodate travellers to the north and west. In front of this building a fire was burning; three men squatted round it, and in the shadows crouching camels stirred uneasily.

"Salaam aleikum" Sebuktagin called out and they answered, "Aleikum as salaam."

Sebuktagin took a lantern from one of them and led Kitti into the house. There was a door on the left of the stuffy little hall and he threw this open and motioned her inside.

"Where's Ihsan?" she asked timidly.

"Go on, get in" Sebuktagin answered.

She began to tremble. "Won't he come soon? What is this place? . . ."

Sebuktagin pushed her forward and slammed the door behind her. She heard the door-bar clang to outside.

She opened her mouth to scream, but even as she did so she realised that to show fear, to betray a wish to escape, would only make her captors guard her more closely. Her quick town-bred mind reacted instinctively. I must pretend not to mind, not to understand what they're going to do with me. . . .

How hot it was in that little room! There was no window; her hand along the crumbling walls touched the cobwebs and withdrew with a tremor of disgust. The dust was thick under-

foot. But they won't keep me here very long. It will be day soon. Or perhaps they'll keep me here all to-morrow and the following night. And at thought of confinement in that narrow airless place her self-control nearly gave way, she stuffed her fist into her mouth to prevent herself crying aloud, and sank down on the floor in a helpless pathetic heap. Why, oh why should such a thing happen to me? she sobbed quietly; what have I done to deserve it? She remembered hearing an old Mulla in Ihsan's village describe the creation of mankind. Allah, wrapped in the robes of a Sultan, majestically turbaned, reclined among the cushions of his durbar-chamber. And he bethought him that he needed subjects whose antics would minister to his pleasure. So taking a handful of dust in his right hand and throwing it upon the earth he cried jovially, "Ten thousand to Heaven and I care not." Then he took up a handful of dust in the left hand and throwing it upon the earth cried, "Ten thousand to Hell and I care not." So were men and women created and their fate predestined. Kitti sighed deeply. Evidently she had been an atom in that second handful. The wind had blown the dust there and Allah's hand groping beside his throne chanced upon that particular spot. The grim old legend

suited her present mood of despair. She leant her back against the wall and wept silently.

Suddenly she stiffened. The outer door slammed, there were steps in the hall, a hand fumbled at the door of her room; the bar swung back, the door creaked open, and there was Sebuktagin with a lantern and a bowl of milk.

"I have brought you your supper," he said.

Quickly she dried her tears, and assumed an air of careless gaiety.

"Ah yes. I was wondering when you would think of attending to your lady guest. I don't often get such off-hand treatment I can assure you. But then, of course, you are all jungly Northerners, and one can't expect Bombay manners from you. And what have we here? Milk. And very nice. But what about something to eat with it?"

"That's quite enough."

"Some *chapattis* would be nice," she looked up at him, smiling.

"I don't think there are any," he grumbled. "I'll see." He put down the lantern and shambled out. She sniffed the milk. It was fresh and smelt good. Suddenly she realised how hungry she was and drank greedily. Soon Sebuktagin returned with two *chapattis* in his hand.

"There you are."

"Thank you. Won't you sit and talk to me while I have my supper?" she patted the ground beside her.

"I'll stand," he said and leant his shoulder against the wall.

"It's dull here. Are we going to spend the whole night here? And where is Ihsan I wonder? Just like him to be late. But there, he's not the man a woman would choose, really. Looks very fine and all that . . . and it's not his fault he's impotent, of course . . . but still . . . Won't you have some milk?"

He shook his head, but she saw that he was watching her intently.

"Yes, I made a mistake in choosing him to run away with. Of course in Bombay you see very few handsome men. They're very polite and cultured, but no real beauties like you see in the Punjab. And so Ihsan shone by comparison. But here, he's nothing out of the ordinary. I've seen lots of men I'd choose in preference to him." She looked up straight into Sebuktagin's face smiling mischievously. He was still staring at her and she could see the whites of his eyes very bright.

"Ah, well, that's fate. . . . But Ihsan really shouldn't have such attractive friends if he wants

to keep his women faithful. Such things he says about his friends behind their backs, too. That's to put one off I suppose. But I haven't lived in Bombay for nothing. I know a man when I see him. Why, in Bombay they used to queue up outside my house. You'd have to consider yourself jolly lucky even to get a sight of me dancing, I can tell you. By the way, you've never seen me dance have you? Would you like me to? It's dull here, isn't it? And a little dancing would help pass the time. Shall we ask the other men in? Why shouldn't they have a treat too?"

"It's not necessary for them to come" said Sebuktagin slowly.

"Oh, not necessary at all. I'd much rather dance before you alone. I know you can appreciate good dancing, and those fellows are just country bumpkins. Well then," she rose to her feet.

Now she had to dance better than she had ever danced for Bali, better even than on the night when she won Ihsan.

"I shall dance the *panghat nritya*" she said; but where were the golden garlands of champak-flowers and the bracelets of yellow tuberose that you should wear for that measure? She had to imagine them, to make believe too that she was

wearing a fine dancing-robe of heavy silk instead of her present torn and dust-covered sari.

She flung her head back and began singing, clicking her fingers like castanets, and slowly moving her lips. She raised her arms and joined the tips of her fingers flat above her head. From the hips she swayed and her feet stamped dully on the dusty floor. She tried to forget the present and the airless little room. She felt the song rising in her throat, and the fire of the dance stirring in her limbs. She was like a leaf moving in the wind. She was like one in a trance in whom the incantations of magicians induce a strange ecstasy of power. She laughed showing her white teeth. She spun round on wind-swift feet, stamping to her own rhythm, bowing and swaying like a sea-bird hovering above misty cliffs.

Sebuktagin watched her motionless, transfixed. She had almost forgotten about him. Then he gave a sudden rending sigh, and she laughed again in triumph. Her face was averted but her long eyes slid round and rested on his face and they were afire. Now she knew that she was winning, and the knowledge was an elixir of joy. She was an Apsara singing in Indra's heaven, she was Durga dancing on the world.

Sebuktagin leant forward and took her waist. She bent back laughing. He spoke hoarsely, gabbling praises. His arm was round her shoulder, and as she listened she let her head fall slowly against his neck. She sighed and relaxed in his arms as though abandoning herself to him. But her mind was alert. They lay enlaced and presently she began to practise all the arts of arousing desire that she had learnt from Bali. And she laughed to herself at the blind and savage passion with which he responded. He was like a great hulking buffalo guided by a skilful driver. She despised him as she tormented him with exquisite caresses. And at last he shuddered and lay still beside her, and was soon snoring, his mouth open, his whole body relaxed in stupor.

Quietly she slipped a fold of her sari from under his arm and tiptoed into the hall. Sebuktagin had only visited her to bring her supper, and not intending to stay long had left the door ajar. Out there the fire had burnt low, and the men lay round wrapped in their long cloaks. She stepped softly out and crept along in the shadow of the wall. When she turned the corner of the house she picked up the skirt of her sari and ran into the night, ran . . . ran . . .

CHAPTER NINE

KITTI stirred miserably and stretched her aching arms. Her throat was parched and she was very hungry. For a moment she could not remember where she was and why she should be sleeping on the hard earth under a tamarisk-tree. And then below her she saw a canal and remembered that she had run thus far through the darkness, and, confused to find her way barred by a dark still stream, had sunk down to sleep under the nearest tree.

Presently a young boy came along the footpath with a small brass jar of milk in one hand and in the other a painted blue cage in which a fighting partridge squawked defiance at the world. Kitti begged of him a drink of milk which he gave her willingly. His dark expressionless eyes travelled incuriously over her and then returned to his partridge. When she had drunk half of the milk in his jar she gave it back to him with murmured thanks, and he went on his way without a word, only stopping to break off a spray of mango-blossom to adorn his turban.

A little refreshed by the milk Kitti rose to her

feet and wandered aimlessly along the footpath that bordered the canal. Her head was racked with intolerable pain and all her limbs ached and throbbed. The dew had been heavy; and perhaps, she thought shudderingly, I may have caught a fever-chill. She went on mechanically, her eyes bent upon the ground, her legs moving heavily and with the effort of one who in a nightmare strives to escape and finds himself weighed down to the earth. When she came to a straw shelter in which an old disused waterwheel was housed she sat down to rest on one of the broad wooden spokes of the wheel. For a moment her headache seemed to be relieved and then an attack of nausea seized her. She rolled over on to the straw-carpeted ground; the earth seemed to curve up to meet her and the heavens to roll round on top of her with a brazen clamour. For a long while she lay there in a stupor as of death. She shivered in violent spasms of ague, her muscles twitched, contracted and relaxed, and the whole of her back was one rending, tearing ache.

At last she heard dimly through the clouds and vapour of intolerable dreams the voice of someone calling kindly to her, and felt a soft hand on her shoulder. Slowly and painfully she opened her eyes. At first she was blinded

by the sunlight which fell upon her eyeballs like a sword; but presently, when she became accustomed to the glare, she made out the face of an old man bending over her, a lined and bearded face, without turban or covering, set upon a shrunken, half-naked body. She saw in the old man's right hand a yellow triangular flag, and from the rope about his waist hung a rosary. She knew then that he must be a pilgrim and her first fears at sight of a stranger were quieted.

"What is it, sister?"

"Nothing, my uncle. I am a little ill. I was walking when I felt the fever come upon me."

"If it is the ordinary fever our Tafar will cure you easily enough," and he turned and called out to a row of pilgrims standing a short distance behind him. A young man, dressed completely in black, came forward and squatted down beside Kitt.

"We can camp here for to-day," the old man said to the other pilgrims, "and to-morrow when this sister of ours is recovered we can go on our way."

"Whither are you bound, uncle?"

"We have come from the province of Delhi on pilgrimage to the shrine of that great saint, the divine Hashim Shah." And the old man raised his face to the sun and his features were

illuminated with pious exultation, "And to pay our homage and lay our lives at the feet of his descendant, the reigning Pir Sijdehnishin, the holy Zaman Shah," and raising his voice he cried, "Ehlamdulillah—rah 'lalamin. Praise be to God, the Master of the Universe!" And all the pilgrims clasped their hands and repeated after him "Praise be to God!"

The young black-vestured Tafari had been watching Kitti with his long slant eyes that were dark and opaque and seemed to be gazing perpetually back and down into the abyss of his own soul. After a while he said in a faint, shrill voice, "She has a little ordinary fever. To-morrow she will be well," and stretching out his long thin fingers he began softly to massage her forehead just above the eyebrows. The slow caress of those supple fingers soothed her headache and she fell into a drowsy calm, a resigned repose. Seeing that she was about to sleep, Tafari untied from his own throat a silver chain from which hung a minute copy of the "Risalo" of Hashim Shah, encased in silver, and hung it round Kitti's neck. Then he began to whisper prayers and incantations that flowed through Kitti's dreams like a gentle rain.

She awoke strong and refreshed. It was an hour before dawn but the pilgrims were already

astir. They had made a fire of dry sticks and squatted round it, watching the flames flickering round the sooty belly of the pot in which water was boiling. Seeing Kitti awake the old man came and sat by her and held a cup of milk to her lips and gave her a slice of maize bread.

"I am sorry we can offer you nothing more, sister," he smiled, "but we are poor men and in accordance with our vow have to live on the gifts of the charitable. Alas! in these times men's hearts have grown hard and selfish and we often go all day without food. When we have nothing to eat we sit outside the houses of the rich and sing hymns, the hymns of our Master, Hashim Shah, and often the Master softens their hearts and they send us out a bowl of rice or a cup of curds."

He chatted on, his pleasant, wrinkled face wreathed in childish smiles to see the relish with which Kitti drank the milk and ate the maize bread. Once she checked her hand with the bread half-way to her mouth and exclaimed, "But am I not taking your food from you?" and the old man laughed, "Dear little sister, if the Almighty has seen fit to send us to give you nourishment He will surely not send us away hungry."

The other pilgrims, squatting in a circle

round the fire, were listening while Tafari (who alone of the party could read and write) read out to them verses from Hashim Shah's sacred poems. Specially they loved his famous ode of the Bodiless Head. They explained to Kitt that the Moghul Governor of the Frontier Province, alarmed at the spread of Hashim's evangel, had sent a lying report against the Saint to the Imperial Court, and the Emperor had ordered Hashim's execution. The cruel order was obeyed and the soldiers brought back the severed head to show to the Emperor; but all the way to Delhi the bodiless head sang a marvellous ode to the Divine Love. And when the soldiers stood in the throne-room and showed the head to their master, the tyrant laughed sweetly to see the severed head; but the bloodless lips moved and rebuked him for his pride and cruelty and prophesied the fall of the Empire of Delhi before the arms of a strange people from across the dark ocean. And the soldiers dropped the head in terror, and once more it took up the theme of its ode, singing:

“They have slain me, Lord, for thy sake,
Yet am I ashamed that I have only one life
To lay down for thee.”

The pilgrims nodded and smiled as they recognised favourite passages in the almost endless

quatrains of that ode, nodded or swayed with closed eyes in an ecstasy of devotion.

The old man sat in silence by Kitti's side. His hands were clasped round his knees and his pale eyes gazed into the distance.

Kitti guessed that he was wondering what to do about her and how to suggest that the pilgrims were anxious to be on their way.

"Do not bother about me," she told him. "I know that you want to finish your pilgrimage, uncle. I am much stronger now."

"But where do you live, sister? Have you no home? We cannot leave you alone and ill. Tell us which is your village that we can at least escort you there."

"I have no village," said Kitti, "and no home nor any friends. I am quite alone now." Then a strange and daring thought darted through her mind. "Uncle, could I not accompany you upon your pilgrimage? I would keep out of the way and not disturb the men at their prayers. I could cook for you. . . ."

The old man was perplexed. He wrinkled up his forehead and rubbed one bony, knobbly forefinger along the side of his nose.

"You see, sister . . ." he began hesitatingly, "we are monks and have forsworn the company of women . . . what will the villagers

before whose doors we beg for food say when they see in our midst a young and pretty girl?"

Kitti nodded and the tears came into her eyes. But even as the old man was explaining his difficulties he seemed suddenly to change his mind. "Look, sister, I will just ask my brothers."

He went over to the group around the fire. There was a murmured colloquy. Most of the pilgrims were old men, far removed from any interest in the things of this world, oblivious of all but their faith. They cared little who accompanied them so long as their devotions were not interrupted. They had observed Kitti with as little interest as if she had been an ailing plant. Probably they despised old Jumo for making them stop for some hours solely on account of a sick woman. When the world is so full of sorrow and pain, and since the only release is death, why should one be concerned over one miserable drop in the ocean of suffering humanity? But old Jumo, though the elected leader of their band, was always worrying about sick people and crying children and animals in pain. Still, he was a good old man, a real saint as they all acknowledged even in their absorption in their own perfection, and

they shrugged their shoulders with a smile at his little vagaries. So now they nodded agreement at his earnest entreaty. Only Tafari protested, Tafari the young zealot, with his dark inward-gazing eyes and the fire of mania smouldering behind the pale drawn curtains of his face. "Women," he muttered, "the brood of Eve. How many prophets have warned us against them? They are the fountain of sin and the doorway of damnation. The gates of hell are fashioned like the parted lips of a girl. They have been accursed, accursed, accursed, since their Mother did tempt and seduce from virtue our Father, the prophet Adam." He rambled on incoherently, but the others ignored him. They had already forgotten what the discussion was about and sat back on their heels, staring with pale unseeing eyes at the sun. Tafari wandered down to the water and drew his cloak over his head. When the other pilgrims gathered up their sticks and their rosaries and the brass mug they shared for milk and were ready to start on their way, they called out to Tafari. He did not reply, but remained motionless by the water's edge. After calling again they shrugged their shoulders and, turning their faces to the west, trudged in single file along the narrow footpath. A few paces behind the

last pilgrim followed Kitti, her face veiled in her sari.



Gradually Kitti became more and more absorbed in the life of the pilgrims. In the reaction after her terror and flight from Sebuktagin she was happy to have no plans to consider, nothing to do save live and dream and forget. She would sit on the outskirts of the circle round the pot in which simmered their evening meal, and listen enthralled to the ballads they sang and the tales they told of the miracles of their Master. The pilgrims came from a monastery near Delhi, founded by Vilayet, the favourite disciple of Hashim Shah. Vilayet had a long beard which reached to his feet, and as he walked before his Master, slowly wagging his head, with the end of his beard he brushed the road before the holy man. He was once kidnapped, however, by an unscrupulous butcher, who had found human beings cheaper and easier to obtain than cattle. He cut up Vilayet and sold him off in portions to his clients as beef. However, as soon as each of these portions was put into the oven it began singing one of Hashim Shah's hymns, and every housewife recognised the voice of the beloved

disciple emanating from her own joint; so the butcher's deceit was discovered and Vilayet was reassembled and restored to life by his Master. After the death of Hashim Shah all his disciples separated, and wandering to the different provinces of India each founded a fraternity to propagate the cult of Hashim.

Kitti, who in Bombay had listened enraptured to "Mother's" stories of Moghul Delhi and all its magic and beauty and doom, was as deeply absorbed by the wonderland of these old Islamic myths. She believed without question even the most fantastic and grotesque legends. It was difficult not to, living among men who accepted them with unquestioning faith. Now one, now another of the pilgrims would tell her in his dreamy, remote voice of some occasion in his life when Hashim Shah had helped him, had appeared to him in a dream or whispered counsel in his ear. To them the long saga of the Saint's life was more real and more significant than the most momentous happenings in their own existence or in the world around them.

Kitti sat and listened wide-eyed while they told her incidents of the Saint's famous tour of India; how when he visited Benares all the priests of the Hindu temples, the swarming an-

chorites and friars of that holy place, were afraid that the enormous piety and merit of the Muslim saint might eclipse the fame of their own gods, and they sent him a gold cup brimming with milk to show that Benares was already full of saints and there was no room for even one more. But Hashim Shah placed a rose-petal so that it floated delicately on the surface of the milk (showing by this gesture that there was yet room for another and a greater saint who would float above all the others even as the petal floated above the milk), and justified by his retort he rode in triumph into the infidel city. How, when praying in the Great Mosque at Delhi, to show his divine power he had knelt down with his back to Mecca—the priests had raised hands of horror at this sacrilege—and then slowly the whole earth had swung round till Mecca was facing the Saint. How he had journeyed to Medina, riding over the sea upon his cloak. How he had dug a canal for the King of Multan by jumping upon a thornbush and making it carry him across the desert, leaving a gaping track behind. How even the dogs that ate the scraps from the Saint's table became instantly converted to Islam and sitting in rows would piously repeat the creed of the True Faith.


These and many other stories the pilgrims would tell through the warm evenings, and Kittisat entranced. Precocious in so many ways, she had still a child's nature and a child's love of marvels. Carried away by the infectious zeal of their devotion she shuddered when some jealous sorcerer forged his thunderbolts to bring the Saint to the ground and laughed with glee when the Saint triumphed and the wicked sorcerer was brought low. Gradually and almost unconsciously she became as fervent a disciple of the long-dead Hashim as any of the pilgrims. In Bombay she had heard little of religion. Muezzins called from minarets, Hindu gongs tolled, but they were faint lonely notes in the thunderous symphony of the city, having little relation to the prosaic streets with their swaying clanging trams and hooting motors, trains rumbling over iron bridges, the shrill voices of newsboys and the screech of gramophones. But here in the wastes of the north were none of the familiar landmarks of her childhood; and the world, in which she had been, as a Bombay *gamine*, so comfortably at home, was now strange and charged with menace. So she clung with deepening emotion to the pilgrims' evocation of a loving omnipresent saint. She still dreamed sometimes of Ihsan, of Ihsan as she first saw him

in Bali's house, and wept in her sleep to feel the touch of his warm body and cried "Ihsan, Ihsan, why did we quarrel? we could have loved each other so deeply. I was a little fool to bother you about money. But then why were you so cruel to me, beating me like that?" And then somehow or other it was not Ihsan at all but Hashim Shah who held her in his arms and kissed her, and gathering her to his breast bore her away to the gardens of Paradise. She stirred uneasily in her sleep murmuring "Hashim! Hashim!" and the few pilgrims who still sat musing late about the crumbling fire looked at her and nodded approvingly: "She is becoming a worthy daughter of the Saint." And even in the day, as she sat by herself under some beemurmuring champak-tree, she would fall into a day-dream and imagine that she saw Hashim riding over the plain on his white horse. She called "Hashim!" and though miles away he heard her and turned his horse and as he passed her lifted her gently on to the crupper in front of him; and as they galloped towards the east she felt his lily-scented breath warm upon her neck. . . . And somewhere there below the horizon were the pearl-misted towers of the magic city towards which they rode. In those summer dawns the world was full of mirage and every

dream-city was the magic citadel of Hashim. Far, far away, as it were the other end of the world, turrets and palaces rose magnificent and endless as fabled Babylon, fair and mysterious in the opal dust of distance. The pilgrims told Kitti that mirages were created by the Almighty in warning memory of the doom of Bahmanabad. Raised by tremendous spells from the bowels of the earth by Bahman, Prince of Persia, that had been the greatest and loveliest city ever beheld by the children of men. But its king was cruel and lustful. He carried off a fisher-girl against her will and imprisoned her in a high brazen tower till she should consent to yield to him. In her despair she leaned forth from a window in that tower and cried to God to avenge her; and the people mocked her. But God heard her prayer and sent an earthquake which swallowed up the beautiful wicked city and all its children. . . . And Kitti saw the roofs and temples spread out far below her, for she was the pretty fisher-girl; and as she prayed she saw the black storm gathering from the four corners of the world, and felt the ground stir like the breast of a bird; and then as towers and tombs and palaces leaned over and ruined upon the boiling earth the heavens parted and Hashim fell like an eagle from the clouds and bore her

away to his pavilion in the sky, where, to the sound of sighing fountains, she ate sweetmeats from a golden casket.

The last evening of their pilgrimage came. On the morrow they would see the place of their desire, the Pir-jo-Goth, where the descendant of Hashim Shah received the homage of the faithful. The pilgrims sat up till late singing and reciting prayers and telling each other of the wonders of the Kalandar's shrine. And when it was still dark they rose and took the road. At daybreak they saw in the distance a great cliff jutting up from the plain, and half-way up the slope the gold-roofed tomb of Hashim glittered like the jewel-embedded navel of a god. The pilgrims raised a shout of triumph, waved their flags, and sinking on the ground gabbled out wild incoherent prayers of thanksgiving.



CHAPTER TEN

THE Pir, Zaman Shah, sat in state upon the balcony of his palace overlooking the great square and facing the blue-tiled walls and golden dome of his ancestor's tomb. High on the summit of the hill was the Macedonian Fort, a sagging mass of shapeless masonry, all that was left of the once-lordly battlements of the divine two-horned Iskander. Red-brown houses clustered in a hollow of the hill, climbing to the small plateau whereon was the Pir's palace and Hashim's tomb and the great square. That square was now filled with excited crowds, swarming beneath the Pir's balcony to get a better view of the holy man, or trooping into the shrine to pay their respects to Hashim. Each man as he entered the outer door of the shrine kicked off his shoes and rang the great bronze bell that hung between the door-posts. Beggars, exposing frightful ailments, leaned forward from the shadowy niches of the archway whining for alms. Out came the little leather purse from the sash and a few broken coins were scattered in the name of Allah, while the beggars flung themselves on the

ground, fighting and gabbling like wild beasts. Then the pilgrim passed out into a wide cool courtyard, murmurous with pigeons and sweet with sprinkled rose-water. And he saw the shrine which before had been hidden by houses, and he cried "Ah—aah!" slowly with deepening awe, so beautiful were those towering marble walls, blue-shadowed, intricate with mosaics of orange-trees and griffons and peacocks, glorious with Persian tiles of piercing blue. At the door of the inner tomb, a door constructed wholly of beaten silver, the devotee would prostrate himself and kiss the doorstep seven times. When he passed into the darkness of the sanctuary his eyes were at first blind, but presently as they became accustomed to the gloom he saw the enormous marble sarcophagus inlaid with jewels and coloured glass, worked into patterns of flowers and peacocks and green, rose-ringed parakeets. Across the tomb was a priceless Shiraz carpet, and at the head reposed the turban of the Saint, a huge shapeless mound of gold embroidery and cunningly-worked silk, decorated with peacock feathers and sprays of osprey. An old, old man, the Mujawir or keeper of the shrine, would creep forward and in a melancholy rasping voice repeat the miracles and marvels of the

Saint's life, and at the end would produce from a silver chest the robes that had clothed the Saint at the moment of his death. He would open the robes and show the gaping rents that the sharp swords had torn, and the dark stains left by that holy blood. "And at each stroke," he repeated, "the Saint uttered no cry of pain, no word of reproach, but blessed his assassins lovingly." The devotee would lift the robes and press them to his lips, his forehead and his eyes. The tears would stream from his eyes and muttered, choking prayers mount to his lips. The keeper would then discreetly indicate a brass platter at the foot of the tomb and the devotee left his offering, sometimes emptying his pockets, tearing off his rings and casting them in the platter with hoarse cries of emotion. As soon as he had given his offerings the old man murmured blessings on the generous devotee and retired back into the shadows in which he seemed for choice to live. And the tomb sank again to silence. From the distance, miles away it seemed, like the surge of the sea far down under overarching cliffs, came faintly the dull thunder of the crowd in the great square, a slow ebb and flow of muffled sound that made yet more intense the stillness of this holy place. It was ice-cold and the air thin and

dry. The white tomb glimmered vaguely in the darkness like a sea-beast couched in a deep ocean cave. One saw that the walls were covered with Persian tiles; fabulous birds spread their rainbow wings above stiff angular trees laden with vermilion fruit. But oh, how still it was, an inhuman void, a dark emptiness and remoteness from all pleasant human things. When one spoke or moved it was like sacrilege. The noise rustled ominously through the shadows, and the echoes ran about the walls in queer rivulets of sound and subsided with a lingering sigh. And the devotee would kiss the cold pale carven stone of the tomb and bow his head to the soft carpet of dust in terror and supplication.

And then the door would rattle open, a troop of pilgrims would clatter noisily in crying "Allah! Allah!" with boisterous religiosity—and the spell would be broken. One saw that the carpet over the tomb was torn and threadbare, the great turban soiled with birds' droppings—and back flitted the old Mujawir to indicate the brass platter, once more miraculously empty.



The Pir sat still and expressionless as an idol,

drinking in the homage of the multitude. As far as his eye could reach were the hosts of his followers, their faces upturned in rapturous adoration. On all the roof-tops of the neighbouring houses were gathered the women, swathed in white cloth, a tiny fold being left open for the eyes to gaze upon the Pir. In the square, besides the concourse of peasants from the surrounding country were many bands of pilgrims from distant monasteries devoted to the cult of Hashim Shah. Each band of pilgrims had its distinctive prayer and its distinctive shout of salutation, and the air was filled with the babel of their cries.

Presently from the gate of the shrine came a deep booming. Two half-naked, purple-gleaming negroes beat with maniac fury upon two enormous drums. A wave of frenzy passed over the crowd. The men trembled with excitement, were shaken with gusts of delirium. Their eyes stared fixedly into the air, their limbs twitched. Slowly the whole assembly was swept into a strange convulsive dance. They jiggled up and down like lifeless marionettes, now bowing their heads to the earth, now leaping into the air, now spinning round and round like a whirlwind, now standing with bodies rigid but with heads lolling drunkenly from side

to side. And the air was rent with the roar of "Allah! Allah! Allah!"

Kitti had been saddened to hear Jumo wondering to his fellow-pilgrims what they should do with her now they were arrived at their holy city; for it would seem strange to the pious in Pir-jo-Goth that the fraternities of the Delhi province arrived with a young woman in their train—to cook for them maybe, but Jumo could see the waggings of heads and murmurs of shocked surprise. Kitti knew though that if she suggested leaving them now and fending for herself Jumo would ply her with questions and, learning that she had no plans and indeed nowhere on earth to go, would probably decide to brave the disapproval of the city rather than abandon her. And to save the pilgrims from embarrassment she slipped away from them in the crowds that thronged the great square, an easy enough matter, for the pilgrims stood gazing ecstatically at the descendant and earthly representative of their Master, raising their arms and crying blessings upon his head, the Pir Zaman Shah, as he sat motionless upon his balcony surrounded by his khalifas, his face painted with antimony and framed with a white turban as enormous as a roc's egg. Kitti too (in the intervals of slipping between yelling negroes, recovering her breath

from an elbow jabbed in her ribs, drawing her sari over her face and thrusting aside resentfully with her shoulder some would-be admirer) found time for hurried glances at the figure on the balcony exalted above the crowd—the descendant of Hashim Shah, she kept reminding herself—and was grieved that she was not more moved at the sight. He was impressive enough, she admitted, still and hieratic with the khalifas inclined respectfully towards him on either side and the horse-tail plumes fanning him gently: what had she expected after all? She scolded herself for her folly, for all her day-dreams of Hashim Shah had convinced her his descendant and representative would be somehow more than human, and at least young and beautiful as a young panther, instead of old, withdrawn, remote like a figure on an antique tapestry.

And then began the roar of the negroes' drums, so near her that she lifted her hands to her ears to shut out the prodigious noise, and she could feel, almost physically, the shiver of hysteria that passed over the crowd, first a shiver and sharp hiss of indrawn breath and then a thin cry in one corner of the square of "Allah! Allah!" soon drowned in a rolling echo of hoarse clamour. Presently the men all around her were jigging up and down, hopping now on

one foot, now on the other, heads flung back to stare gaping at the sky and then tossed forward drunkenly upon their breasts, arms rigid at the side but fingers twitching as though with ague. She noticed an old man beside her with an umbrella in one hand and a basket of vegetables in the other—evidently he had hoped to do his morning shopping before paying his devotions, she thought—and he too, caught up unresisting in the wave of religious intoxication, began skipping like a boy, shouting “Ya Allah!” till one by one the cabbages and *brinjals* jumped out of his basket and rolled away to be trodden underfoot and squelched upon the sandstone pavement. Now it was easier for Kitti to make her way from the square, for no one noticed her any more nor resisted however roughly she pushed her way. The men were like animated dolls with glazed staring eyes, they swayed at her touch, leaned back to let her pass and then jolted forward as though the spring was relaxed again. It was almost terrifying, that feverish absorption, and Kitti was glad when she arrived at the far fringe of the crowd and ran down a narrow lane. The houses leaned crookedly overhead and the lane curved round and down towards the river that washed the base of the cliff on which the city was built. At the first

turning of the lane the roar from the great square died away into a dull confusion of sound, so thick were the walls of the encompassing houses, all of baked mud and whitewashed, with thin slits for windows and wide balconies from which hung gay carpets to mark the present festival.

This must be the eastern gate of the town, Kitti thought as she came to a tall archway adorned with Persian tiles; and further on was the river, sleek and leaden in the noon sun with fields of yellow *jambho* on either bank. Just beyond the archway the road was lined with little huts, roofless and having walls of rattan screens supported by bamboos. Kitti guessed them to be the dwellings allotted to the many courtesans who would visit the city during the festival, always a time of brisk custom. They would not, of course, be allowed inside the city of the Pir—that would be outrageous pious sentiment—but since human needs are universal and cannot be ignored, and since the women as good Mussulmans paid a tenth of their earnings to the treasurer of the shrine, there could be no harm in their carrying on their trade outside in the open country where the rumour of their wanton conduct would not disturb the repose of the Saint. And Kitti felt

a sudden leap of hope. "At least I may be able to earn my food there," she said and hurried forward.

But at the doorways of the first huts sat very fashionably dressed young women with painted faces and high-heeled English shoes, smoking scented cigarettes; and when Kitti approached them they began to jeer at her, saying they didn't want any gutter-bitches near them. And Kitti, not guessing they were probably jealous of her pretty face, looked down at her sari, the only dress she had, and realised almost for the first time how torn and dirty it was (when with the pilgrims she had never needed to think of wearing pretty clothes to attract men's attention) and what a wretched object she must look to these smart self-assured young creatures, and she burst into tears and ran down the lane between the little huts, with the jeers still ringing in her ears. "Bitches" she sobbed, "just because of my ill-luck they laugh at me. And in Bombay I was every bit as smartly dressed as they. . . ." She stumbled on blindly even after she could no longer hear their taunts, and then suddenly realised how tired she was and sank down on a fallen tree-trunk with a sigh of despair. There were fewer huts now; it was much further from the city and only the

poorer women lived here. She was so absorbed in her misery that she did not at first hear a voice behind her asking what was the matter, but when the query was repeated she turned, brushing the tears away, and saw a stout old woman standing in the door of one of the most ramshackle huts, holding apart with a wrinkled brown hand the torn and tawdry curtain of the doorway and smiling half-shyly and half-inquisitively at the girl huddled and weeping on the fallen tree-trunk. Kitti smiled back, feeling a sudden renewal of hope, for the old woman's fat round face seemed gentle and kindly, her shy smile simple and domestic behind the clumsy mask of paint.

"What's the matter child?" the woman asked again, holding out a hand to Kitti, a hand with fat baby's wrists and cheap rings on the pudgy fingers. Kitti got up and walked towards her.

"They were so horrid to me those conceited little bitches up there. I only asked for a little food and a place to rest and they began screeching out abuses at me."

"I know. I know," the old woman shook her head, pursing up her lips like a censorious aunt, "there's nothing those impudent young hussies won't do. Abuse? Why I don't know

half the words they use, and I've been in some rough places in my time. And as for looks, well though I say it myself, I was a finer woman in my time than any of them and never put on any airs about it either. They're thin as sticks most of them, but the men seem to like that nowadays. In my young days everyone laughed at the Englishmen going to bed with bamboo-women, and my young men used to tell me they liked an armful. Ah well, that skinny type soon goes to pieces. I've seen it many a time."

"Well, anyway, whatever they think of themselves there's no need to abuse a poor stranger."

"No, indeed," she clucked disapprovingly. "No need whatever. You're quite right. That's what I've said often myself. No need for abuse. Ah well, they've got no idea of manners these modern hussies. When I was younger we were only too ready to help a sister in trouble, and a girl like me that's always been shown so much kindness in one way and another knows that a smile and a nice word never did anyone any harm."

"After all I only asked for a little food—perhaps a drink of milk," Kitti repeated.

"And why shouldn't you? But there, I've got some milk myself, and here I am standing and chatting all day instead of getting you the

milk as I should be doing. Come into my house, child."

She led the way into the miserable little hut. The only furniture was a stringed cot, a little tin box, and some cooking utensils in a corner.

"I'm afraid my things are not as tidy as I should like. I'd only just got up and dressed myself when I saw you. Of course it's very early yet and usually I like to lie late in the morning. If you didn't get some rest when you could where would you be, I always say. But then at these fairs you very often get an early customer—some schoolboy sneaking out, you know,—oh, I like a nice schoolboy I must say, they're so gentle and babyish and I can mother them. Quite a change from some of my customers, I can tell you. There, sit down on the bed dear and I'll get you your milk. Allah! did you ever see such a state of confusion, things thrown just anywhere. That was that rough fellow last night, not at all a nice man. Oh, very violent he was. But I mustn't complain, as he was quite generous. Of course dear, you must understand," she looked up with an absurd attempt at coyness, "I can't pick and choose in the way I used to. Farmers are about as high as I hope for now, and they're not really a refined class. Still one mustn't grumble.

And if they are rather clumsy and loutish, at least they always prefer a woman with some body to her, not like those peaky hussies up the road."

"I was a dancer in Bombay," Kitti began to boast. "I was much admired. Can't I help you to-night by dancing?"

"Well it's very sweet of you child. And I'm grateful for your offer, I'm sure. But you see the men who come to me aren't quite the type you've been accustomed to, I dare say. Dancing and all that goes on in the houses of those hussies where the smart young Nawabs like a bit of titillation. But you see the men who come to me are usually straight in from the village and they don't want any titillation. Quite the contrary. 'No waste of time in dancing or polite conversation' they always say, and of course provided they're not mean it's all the same to me. Saves a girl's legs not having to twirl and hop about the place. Here's your milk dear."

She stood, arms akimbo, watching Kitti drink the milk greedily.

"Drink it all dear, I can easily get some more. Perhaps you'd like something to eat?"

Kitti nodded.

"Of course you would. Now where's that

maize-cake I made yesterday? Don't say someone's taken it. No here it is. Well, what a place to put it, all among my shoes." She dusted it with the fringe of her sari and handed it to Kitti, who broke off half and crumpled it into her mouth. "Go on, have the other half. Oh well, just as you like. It'll come in useful this evening I dare say."

Kitti looked up. "If I can't dance for you to-night, couldn't I help you . . . with the men? . . ."

"No dear," she patted Kitti's shoulder. "It's very kindly meant and I think it's very sweet of you to suggest it. But I expect my customers aren't quite your type."

For a moment Kitti wondered maliciously whether the old thing was afraid that her customers would all choose Kitti instead of herself. But she went on complacently, "You see they know what to expect. Oh, they like a plump woman, there's no doubt."

"Do you think I'm too thin?"

"Well, everybody's taste is different isn't it? And I dare say in Bombay you would be just right. But the village people here are so old-fashioned in their ideas."

Kitti looked at her arms. They *were* thin, certainly. And it's a wonder they aren't much

thinner she said to herself, considering what I've been through.

"You look tired, child. Would you like to rest a little? Lie down on the bed. I've got to go out to the bazar to buy something for my dinner."

Kitti thanked her and stretched out her legs on the hard string cot and almost immediately fell asleep.

When she awoke it was already afternoon. Her hostess was squatting over a little fire of twigs crackling between three bricks on which a kettle was boiling.

"Well, you've had a lovely sleep haven't you dear? That's right. Feeling better now, I expect. Just woke up in time for a cup of tea."

She opened her tin box and took out two cups and poured the tea, rich treacly stuff, boiled with much milk and a thick layer of coarse sugar.

Outside, the lane of the prostitutes was waking up. Footsteps passed and repassed, sandals pattered softly, Turkish slippers shuffled in the dust. In the distance, from the huts of the smart young girls came a murmur of drums, rehearsing rolls and tattoos.

Kitti realised that she would soon be in the way, and made the excuse that she would like a stroll.

"There's no hurry dear. I don't often get anyone coming as early as this."

She drew the curtain and looked out.

"Oh, quite a number of men about already." Two young bloods in sky-blue turbans strolled down gazing into each hut. If there was a girl standing in the doorway they tipped up her chin with the silver knobs of their canes to get a better view. Presently there was a cry of "Way! Make way!" and two sepoy in scarlet-fringed turbans parted the crowd with many bamboo sticks, shouting officiously and kicking the dogs in the gutter and whacking a small grey donkey who had lost his master and was standing quite quietly musing in the middle of the lane. It was a Sub-Inspector deputed from the nearest police headquarters to keep order during the fair. All the girls ran out of their huts and stood waiting, hoping to secure his patronage. He came by, swinging his switch and looking carefully at the smiling faces. Some of the younger girls greeted him mischievously with a passable imitation of the police salute. One called out in broken English "Police! Here! Quick march!" but he turned round grinning and barked at her "Dis-Miss!" and all the girls laughed obsequiously.

When the Sub-Inspector came near the

humbler huts of the poorer women he stopped, and waving his stick said to one of his sepoys, "That's all is it? Now only the cheaper trash."

The man saluted. "Yes, Khan Saheb."

"H'm," grunted the Sub-Inspector. "You might have told me what a poor show it was and saved me the trouble of coming. I don't see a single pretty girl. Nothing but small fry."

He turned and swung off towards the city. Kitti could have slapped his face.

"Conceited beast!" she said.

"Oh, they're all like that dear, the police. Especially here on the Frontier, where they're little kings. You have to be thankful that they let you live at all."

"Well I think I'll stroll down by the river."

She thanked the old woman for her kindness.

"Not at all dear. Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow?" Kitti realised that this was a hint that she wouldn't be able to offer her shelter during the night as she would be busy.

"Of course, I'll come and see you."

"That's a good girl, mind you do. I'm leaving the day after."

She stood at the door of her hut waving to

Kitti, looking as comfortably domesticated as an aunt speeding a child on the way to school.



How quiet it was down by the river. The sky was a soft ashen blue rimmed with little tumuli of chalk-pink clouds. Far to the east rolled the frontier hills, the great Osman Range at whose foot ended the dominion of the English; their terrible precipices in the soft evening light seemed hardly more material than the puffs of crocus vapour that curled about their towering summits, and the ravines that should have yawned back abysmally between scarred cliffs were now but violet shadows, veins in the soaring pinions of the hills. Between its banks, that were golden with *jambho* and laburnum, the river ran silently, a soft sheen of fritillary-silver upon its unruffled surface. Occasionally came a great Indus-boat, serpent-prowed, with triangular ochre sail and rowers who bent and pulled in unison singing one of the sad old river-songs, or crying in jerky gasps to the patron saint of boatmen "Bahawal Huq! Bahawal Huq!" One fishing-boat was anchored motionless in mid-stream and over the bulwarks men strained at their nets; their

naked backs rippled dark-amber in the sun, and when the bulging nets broke the surface of the stream you caught the gleam of speckled silver in the dripping meshes. On another boat, that passed with a slow plash of oars, moving down-stream to its usual fishing-grounds, a line of trained river cormorants stood motionless along the bowsprit: in the belly of the boat a drum thudded softly and a man sang an old ballad while his comrades beat time to the rhythm of the verse with clapping hands. Then came a long low boat, every inch of its woodwork elaborate with carving. Under a tasselled canopy lolled two young nobles who had hired the boat, and a girl each, for the evening. Kitti, stopping for a moment to watch the beautiful slim boat gliding past, could see the long pale-gold faces of the young men framed by the scarlet cushions against which their heads reclined. Two dancing-women squatted against the side of the boat, their heavily braceleted arms crossed over their knees, their babyish faces half hidden in the stiff folds of their silks. Two musicians leant against the curving ascent of the prow. Plucked strings of a guitar thrummed in soft undertones, and the flute-player repeated again and again the melancholy lilt of a simple country

song. "They will disembark in some quiet backwater," Kitti said to herself, and she pictured to herself the lights and gleaming tables and the swaying forms of the musicians under some rustling banyan-tree. Long after the boat passed out of sight and the splash of the oars was silent, the little melody of the flute-player hovered in the still air.

She turned away with a sigh at her own loneliness. "I must go back to the city," she thought, and began to wonder how she would pass the night and whether she would have to sleep supperless. In the mist the old town seemed unreal and magical, terrace upon terrace of white square flat-roofed houses (each with a tuft of smoke that stood up straight like a blue feather in the charmed stillness), the dome of the Saint's tomb framed with a soft blur of coloured tiles, and over all the upward sweep of the yellow hill, the tumbling ruins of the old Greek fortress mysterious in the gathering gloom. It was impossible to guess at the fervid crowds that swarmed under that tranquil exterior, the façade of marble calm. As the mist increased and spun long filaments over the entranced quiet of the scene one thought of a city under the sea. Overhead a few stars were coming out in the deepening amethyst sky.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I WONDER what all those tents are along the city wall?” Kitti said to herself. At first she thought they must be another encampment of dancing women, but as she came nearer she saw that it was a circus. The grinding whining music of the merry-go-rounds came faintly to her and she could see the puffs of sulphurous smoke and flaring lights and hobby-horses rising and dipping. Presently she saw a pretentious arch of yellow canvas creaking in the wind, bearing the legend “Capt. Ironside’s World-Famous Circus.” Below, the turnstiles wheezed and clicked as each man dropped his anna and pressed forward.

“I wish I had an anna,” thought Kitti; but she had nothing, and she stood on the outskirts of the crowd of loiterers who hung round listening to the announcer bellowing through a megaphone the attractions of the show.

“Best Europe-trained conjurers, hula-dancers from Hawaii, merry-go-rounds and lucky-dips—now’s your chance, walk up there! Hi, you in the smart blue turban have you ever seen a hula-girl?—all naked except for a fringe of grass

just here, think of that! And then there's Mary-John, the Half-Man Half-Woman, the Anatomical Wonder who has baffled all the surgeons of Europe and America. Is it a he or a she? Come and judge for yourself. Just one anna to step into a wonderland of mirth and fun." He was an undersized little half-caste in a check-suit, bow-tie and straw hat. He had a retreating chin and a Charlie-Chaplin moustache. He shouted and pranced to and fro on his platform enjoying his prominence. Ranks of bearded patriarchs stared with expressionless faces understanding about one word in ten. Young bloods with Turkish caps at a rakish angle sauntered up, told each other about the hula-girls and the equivocal Mary-John and shouldered their way through the crowd towards the turnstiles.

"Oh well, it's no good my waiting," Kitti sighed. "One can't get inside without paying and there's no chance of my being able to do that," and sighing she turned away and had almost reached the city gate when she heard a sudden uproar behind. Looking back she saw the crowd by the turnstiles swaying and laughing and presently parting to disclose a European in extraordinary costume exchanging abuses with a half-caste dancing woman. Kitti caught

up her sari and ran back to enjoy the scene. "What odd clothes the Englishman's wearing," she thought, "that wide hat and red shirt, riding breeches and shiny high-heeled boots," for she could not be expected to recognise a circus version of a Wild-West cowboy. And at first she could not make out what the quarrel was about, since the Englishman's Urdu was so barbarous and the girl confined herself to general abuse. But soon she made out the words, "contract . . . and now you say you can't perform to-night because you're going to have a baby . . . smashed up half my show," and she guessed the girl must be one of the hula-dancers—whatever they could be. Spitting over her shoulder a final reference to the sexual appetites of her opponent's grandmother the girl bounced off towards the city. The Englishman made a noise like "humph," and stood with legs apart and arms akimbo watching the retreating figure. Then he kicked the ground once or twice, swung round, nearly punched someone who happened to be in his way and had just reached the gate of his circus when he heard a breathless little voice behind him saying "I can dance. I used to dance beautifully in Bombay," and then adding in English, "Me dance. . . ."

He turned, stared down at the woebegone

figure of Kittī, noticed her torn and dusty sari and then saw the beauty of her pale little face, pushed his hat over his forehead and began to scratch the back of his head. "Dance do yer? Well, I want a proper hula-dancer, understand? People don't come to my show to see ordinary bazar dancing. . . ."

He spoke in English and she only caught the word "bazar." She shook her head eagerly, "Not bazar. Not bazar. Good. Tip-top."

"Tip-top, eh? Who told you that I wonder? But anyway, it's a hula-dancer I want, see? It took me months to train that little bitch and there she goes and lets me down—just on a day like this, when owing to this here fair we expect a decent gate for once."

It was dreadful not understanding what he said, not knowing whether or not he was agreeing to employ her and save her from starvation. She craned forward, her bright enormous eyes trying to read his expression.

"Try," she pleaded, remembering another English word. "Try." Oh, if only she had learnt some more of Bali's English songs, learnt a few more English phrases. . . .

"Try? I'm sure you would girlie!" He hesitated. A pretty little bit of all right. Knows how to make use of her eyes. A real

looker and quite fair, too. Might pass for an Italiano icecreamo any day. "Well, I wonder now. No harm in my giving you a try-over anyway."

"Try," she nodded smiling. "Try."

"Come on then."

They went towards the turnstile, the gate-man saluting. Kitti heard the buzz of comment from the crowd. The turnstile clanged behind them and they were inside the circus grounds. Kitti gazed round her with child-like awe and excitement at the various booths with their showmen shouting the attractions to be seen within. There were numerous stalls with cheap trinkets displayed under flaring acetylene-lamps; bowls of goldfish and china ornaments that you could win by accurate throwing of little rubber rings, shooting-ranges where young Baluchis, proud of their skill with the rifle, plugged at pingpong balls wavering over sprays of water. Kitti gazed about her wide-eyed. She would have liked to inspect each stall, peer into each tent, sample each game, but she was terrified of being separated from the oddly-dressed Englishman and she trotted at his heels.

"Now I'll give you an idea," the Englishman told her, when they reached a large empty tent

with a curtained stage at one end and benches ranged in regular lines on the sanded floor, "of the sort of thing I want you to do. You watch me and then see if you can copy. I'll be able to tell if you'll ever be any use to me."

"Please?"

"Oh, you don't understand? Well, listen. *Ham* dance *karingi*. Then *tum* dance *karingi*? *Savez*?"

She nodded comprehension, and he climbed on to the stage, undid his Sam Browne belt, flung his hat into a corner, stuck his elbows out stiffly and laid his hands splayed out on his hips. He began to hum what he imagined was South-Sea-Island music, "Oh te oh ta ta and a pom pom pom," and began slowly to move his hips in a wide circle, his knees bending with the swing of the hips, and his stomach rolling out and round. Kitti drew a fold of her sari over her mouth to cover her smile. It seemed inexpressibly ludicrous to see that stout middle-aged man swinging his paunch in the dreary light of the petrol-lamps to an audience of dusty benches. But he was frowning concentration on what he imagined to be the great difficulty of the measures he was executing. "Pop pop pop toodle ee ta day," he chanted, stamping his feet on the creaking boards, while

his hips swung wider and his stomach rolled like a wheel.

"Well," thought Kitti, "English dances seem much easier than Indian."

The Englishman broke off with a breathless laugh. "Get the idea, girly? Of course I don't expect you to get it all at once. Took me a year to get the hang of the thing and ever since I've been training girls. So I can tell at once whether you'll shape well. Hop up on the stage, will you? That's right. Now where's my guitar? Ah, here we are, on the pianer. Now off yer go just like I did. Oh, I forgot. *Tum* dance *karingi*, eh?"

"*Ji-ha huzoor.*" Kitti thought it politer to answer his Urdu with Urdu.

He began to strum softly on the guitar and to sing in what he hoped was a whispering baritone, "Oh my Hawaii moon, wouldn't I just like to see you soon. Yes, *juldi* my girl, dance hard. Oh, my Hawaii moon. . . ."

She put her hands on her hips and began to sway her hips as she had seen him do. In many of the dances she had learnt in Bali's house you had to do great swinging movements of the hips, to lean back like a gull in the wind and swing forward with a sweep of the shoulders from the waist. The motions of this "hula"

were child's-play to her. She began to improvise variations. She lifted her arms over her head and clicked her fingers like castanets. She moved slowly across the stage, almost forgetting the Englishman watching her, on whose decision so much depended; she tried not to hear the bouncing guitar whose rhythm was odd and unfamiliar and she made up in her own head a little tune, something like the village airs that they sing at the festivities of country weddings. She swung her head and laughed to herself, stamping her feet, shivering with excitement. And all the time her hips swung heavily in a slow even rhythm, and her breasts shook under her loose cotton bodice.

"That's it girlie, keep it up. You're doing fine!" The Englishman dropped his guitar and began to clap his hands in time to the stamping of her feet. She laughed at him and then threw back her head so that the light shone along the curve of her soft wheat-coloured throat. Her wide skirts rose in waves, rippling to the rhythm of her swinging steps, rose till they billowed above the knees and her slim legs glimmered milky-pale.

The Englishman sprang up and banged the lid of the piano. She stopped, frightened at the clatter.

"You're engaged," he said, jutting out his chin as he had once seen an American financier do in a film of high commerce.

"Please?"

"Damn, what's 'always' in Urdu? Oh yes, *hamesha*. *Tum hamesha* dance *karingi*—with us—er, *hum logonke-sat, savez?*"

"*Meherbani*," she thanked him.

"Oh, not at all. That's quite all right girly. I can see that you've got the knack all right. Of course, there are several things I'll have to show you, but that's only to be expected at the beginning. But I consider you made a damn good shot. Yes, girly, I know a promising pupil when I see her. Well, come and meet the Missus."

Without understanding what he was talking about she followed him.

In an open space between two tents, at the head of a long trestle-table, a grey-haired, bespectacled lady was sitting very upright and absorbed in some sewing.

"Well, here we are girly, this is my wife—*hamara* wife, you know."

The lady pushed her steel spectacles up on to her forehead. Kitty saluted her respectfully.

"Who is this, George?" she asked in a pleasant soft voice.

"I told you how that little viper let me down? . . ."

"Poor child, she couldn't help it. . . ."

"Help it? Of course she could help it. Never trusted that girl. Too free with those eyes of hers. . . ."

"Poor things, they hardly get a chance. They're started off on the Wrong Road so early in life."

"Well, anyway, I'm not sorry she's hopped it. I was damn angry at first, but I think we're on to a better thing now. This little girl here has just been showing me what she can do. I've been putting her through her paces, and by gum, Marjorie, I tell you she shapes well—don't you girly?" He patted her shoulder reassuringly and she smiled gratefully at him.

"Do you speak English?" the lady asked Kittie.

Kittie shook her head, and to her surprise the English lady began talking in passable Urdu.

"The Madam Saheba speaks Urdu like a Lucknow Begum. . . ."

"Oh no" she gave a little chuckle. "What a silly girl you are. But there, I had to learn it or I don't know where we should have been. George is so bad at languages, aren't you dear? He's always telling me that at school he never got any marks for French."

"Well, occasionally one or two for neatness."

"And, of course, these Indian languages are much harder. So, as he said, it was hardly worth his trying. And then, of course, I have to do with the servants. And they take some dealing with I can tell you. As I wrote to my sister in Streatham, you can tell me all you like about your servant difficulty, and it's true it's not hard to get servants out here, but you should see the ones we do get. Clumsy? Well, it's a wonder we ever have any cups and saucers at all." She patted a chair beside her. "Sit down dear, you must be tired after that practising your steps. Do you think you'll find the work difficult?"

"Oh no, Madam Saheba."

"You needn't be so formal, you know dear. You can quite well call me Mrs. Ironside. Of course that wasn't originally our name, but when we started with this circus my husband thought we ought to have a name that looked well on the boards. 'Ironside' was his idea, and though I didn't like it at first I must say it has quite an air about it, hasn't it? 'Captain Ironside'—it sounds very well."

The Captain stood watching them, hands on hips, smiling benevolently. In the harsh white glare of the acetylene-lamp that swayed from a

tent-rope Kitti's face looked very drawn and thin, but she had a brilliant smile that lit up her face and made it beautiful.

"And what's your name dear? You never told us."

"Kitti."

"Well, that's easy enough. I wonder who you got that name from. You aren't a Christian by any chance are you?"

Kitti shook her head.

"What a pity. Ah well, I expect every allowance will be made at the Last Day. It's not for us to judge, I always say."

"What about Kitti trying on her hula-dress, Marjorie?"

"Yes dear. I'll take her to my tent."

Kitti was at first overwhelmed with confusion to see the scanty clothing she was expected to appear in. But Mrs. Ironside laughed gently at her blushes, and showed her the little satin drawers under the Hawaian kilt of dry grass, and the little bodice to conceal the breasts.

"You wouldn't imagine I'd allow any of our girls to appear in any clothes that were really immodest would you? Of course, I'm not really fond of this hula-dancing, but there's no doubt it attracts people, and when you're poor you can't always pick and choose as easily as

those that are better off. Dear dear; how thin you are child." Kitti in her hula-dress looked like a little ghost. "We shall have to fatten you up. Well, anyway, you won't lack plain nourishing food as long as you're with us. I always like to see our boys and girls enjoying their meals. Would you like a cup of tea now?"

Kitti suddenly realised how hungry she was. She nodded eagerly and then stammered out a request for food.

"Haven't had anything since a piece of bread this morning?" Mrs. Ironside clicked her teeth, "Tch, you poor child. I wonder what would be the best for you. You oughtn't to eat much before dancing—because you are going to dance this evening aren't you?—and you'll have a good supper after the show with all the rest of the family. Perhaps a cup of bovril and some toast."

Kitti thought the hot drink delicious and soon began to long to dance.

"When shall we start?"

"Let's see, in about half an hour I think. We never have the circus proper till lateish as it takes people away from the side-shows: the stalls and shooting-range. I'll go and see if that Vera is ready yet."

Vera was the other hula-dancer. She was a

gawky Eurasian with large cow's eyes that always seemed ready to fill with tears.

She hardly spoke to Kitti and Kitti wondered if she disliked her.

"Oh don't you mind our Vera," Mrs. Ironside laughed gently when Kitti confided in her. "She doesn't mean anything. But she hasn't a happy nature. She's married to our mechanic you know, and she's always imagining he's running after other girls, which I don't think he is. Of course he's a bit rackety at times, but all boys are. As I tell Vera, when my husband was younger. . . . But there, I mustn't say anything for no one had a better or kinder husband, that I will admit."

Kitti's debut as a hula-dancer was not very exacting. She soon realised, from the whistles and catcalls of the young louts jostling each other on the wooden benches, that none of the audience had any interest in the dance as such—"and why should they?" she wondered, as she stamped and swung her hips monotonously, following Vera's lead, "for a duller dance I've never seen; it's curious that the Captain imagines it's so special and difficult. The crowd only comes to see two girls with bare legs, and bare thighs shooting out from a skirt of straw." But she danced on, while the Captain strummed

on the guitar and Mrs. Ironside tinkled away on the old piano, and the audience whispered and nudged each other and whistled. Kitti was glad when the guitar began to play slower and the stage curtains wobbled across, jerking along a sagging rope, the audience clapping perfunctorily. Kitti jumped down from the stage and ran to her tent to change. She was anxious to see the rest of the show, and when she found she could see everything from the wings she stood entranced while Captain Ironside appeared on the stage and did some simple conjuring tricks, taking pennies and white mice out of the ears of blushing oafs who had been persuaded to offer themselves for experiment by the guffawing encouragements of their friends. "Tch, you dirty feeder!" the Captain cried jovially as he drew a rabbit from his victim's mouth. "Ooooh!" the audience cried admiringly and then burst into shouts of laughter at the victim's look of horrified incredulity and his indignant expostulation "That was never in my mouth."

The next item on the programme was a shooting display by the Captain. Mrs. Ironside appeared dressed in tights and a spangled cloak with a white plume on her head, and held up balloons which the Captain shot to pieces.

Finally she put a small balloon, painted like an apple, on her head, and the Captain coming forward to the edge of the stage told the audience that he was going to do the famous "William Tell" act, which he had had the honour of showing to His Majesty the King at Olympia. He took careful aim and fired, and the balloon burst with a tiny "plop." Some young Baluchis at the back applauded gravely with sincere commendation: "Wawah! Shabash!" Mrs. Ironside then tripped forward to the edge of the stage, bowed to left and right, and then waited with a fixed smile for the jiggling, creaking curtain.

Then came Mary-John—Half-Man, Half-Woman. He was a little Eurasian pathic. The left side of his face was darkened with tan, a moustache daubed under the nostril and ending abruptly half-way over the upper lip; while the right side of the face was painted and powdered to resemble a girl's, the hair curled and waved, an earring in the ear. In the same way the left side of the body was bare to the waist to reveal the manly breast; while the right side was clothed with the half of a black silk frock under which half a cocoanut simulated the breast. On the left foot he wore a large boot; on the right a high-heeled lady's shoe.

The Captain had learnt parrot-wise a speech in Urdu to explain that the audience were now seeing a unique specimen of androgyne, which had baffled all the doctors, surgeons and professors of the West. "A perfect man on the left, finely developed, muscular," he gabbled, "whilst on the right the soft curves of the female form, the peachlike complexion, the full ripe breast."

The audience murmured its astonishment, quite taken in by the simple little deception. After the Captain finished his speech the androgyne did a ridiculous dance, reminiscent of a charleston. The audience laughed heartily imagining he was clowning. This had at first annoyed Mary-John, who was rather proud of his little dance, but he was a good-natured creature and smiled happily at what he called "the boys having their joke."

After the show the artistes had supper at the long tressel-table behind the big tent. Mrs. Ironside sat at the head, having shed her finery and donned again a simple cotton frock, traces of powder and rouge still lingering, however, on her kindly wrinkled face. She sat up very straight, smiling happily at what she called "her family." She had a large brown tea-pot in front of her and poured out tea for the girls and

for Mary-John. The Captain drank whiskey as did Vera's husband, the circus mechanic who looked after the machinery of the merry-go-rounds and of the shooting-gallery, a sallow young Eurasian with a blank and lifeless face, but with bright, rather wicked little eyes. He and Vera sat side by side, but she would not speak to him as she was in the sulks at something—she refused to tell him what. But he guessed that she suspected him of being the father of the disgraced hula-girl's child, and felt very flattered at her suspicion. It was grand the way people assumed no woman could resist him. He sat, leaning forward with elbows stuck out aggressively, chewing noisily, his mouth too full. Whenever Vera asked him to pass the butter or sugar she did so in a whining plaintive voice as if that also would be sure to be denied her. But he cried "Sugar, eh? Oh yes, no doubt," and passed her the chipped china bowl with a swaggering gesture, banging it down on the table in front of her and grinning up into her face. Even when he smiled, showing large yellow teeth, and his eyes twinkled with bravado, still the expression of his face remained blank as though all the life had been drained out of it.

"Come on Kitti dear, pass your cup along"

Mrs. Ironside urged, "you're hardly eating anything. Have a little more potted meat? That's right dear, help yourself. And Mary-John, do look after Kittie. Some more tea, Vera dear?"

"Thank you Mrs. Ironside. I don't suppose my husband would mind passing my cup."

"Not as good a gate as I had hoped," the Captain complained. "Ought to be though, at a fair like this. Of course it's a damned one-horse town, and I dare say half the people don't know what a circus is. But in Quetta they told us that you often get a quarter of a million people at this fair; and if only half of them gave us a look-up it would put us on our feet for a long time. But it doesn't look like as if they were going to. Oh well, we've struck a bad patch before now. We'll stay on a bit. I haven't booked a plot of land for the tents at Lahore yet, and that's our next port of call."

"Of course they're awfully backward, savage people in these parts," Mrs. Ironside shook her head, "you can hardly expect them to appreciate a good circus."

"Well, all ay know is" put in Mary-John, "that ay'll be glad to be back in a Hindu province. They get so fresh with one, these Muhammadans. Now ay never encourage them

with even a smile, yet the moment ay appear in the street ay have to run for it. It's nearly as bad as it was at Colombo when the Fleet was in."

"That'll do Mary-John," remarked the Captain severely, while Vera wrinkled her nose and Mrs. Ironside said, "Eat up your supper you silly boy, and don't talk nonsense. Look, your tea's quite cold. I'll pour you out another cup, shall I?"

"Oh, thank you dear Mrs. Ironside, you are good to me. Just like a mother," he breathed reverently.

"Been buying any more black pyjamas?" Vera asked him and everyone laughed. They were never tired of teasing him because he had once spent the whole of his month's pay on a night-suit.

The Captain poured himself out some more whiskey.

Kitti found that she was to share a room with Vera. The troupe lived over a soda-water shop in the bazar, and the two hula-girls slept in a little room overlooking the front porch. This was a grievance with Vera, who didn't like the idea of her husband sleeping in the same room as Mary-John.

"The Ironsides share a room," she grumbled,

"so why shouldn't my husband and I?" And to the argument that that meant an extra room to be hired, since Mary-John and the other hula-girl couldn't be expected to sleep in the same room, she muttered angrily, "Why ever not? It's not as if Mary-John could do anything. . . ."

She continued her lament to Kitti in a mixture of English and Urdu, caring little whether Kitti understood her or not.

Kitti soon tired of trying to follow her complaints, and walking over to the open windows sat on the window-edge and gazed out over the sleeping city. The great dome of the shrine was like a rounded thundercloud, rearing up over the huddled buildings, ashen in the moonlight. That must be the Pir's palace, that great square barrack beside the shrine. A single negro spearman stood motionless on guard on the flat roof, silhouetted against the moon-pale sky. At intervals he called to other sentinels whom Kitti couldn't see, but who must have been patrolling the courtyard and the balconies of the palace. The sound of their thin reedy voices drifted down the night with the melancholy of gulls crying across a lonely mere.

Kitti shivered, and turning back into the room tumbled into her bed. It was very com-

fortable, with English pillows, and she was almost immediately asleep.

She seemed hardly to have closed her eyes when a strange noise jerked her back into consciousness. It was still dark and she turned over, slipping back into her dreams—"There it is again!" she cried, and sat up, terrified. A wailing as of wolves, rising and falling. "Loo-hoooor! Loo-hoooor!"

"Vera! Vera!" cried Kitti.

"What's the matter?" Vera rubbed her eyes angrily, staring at the trembling figure in the other bed.

"That noise!"

"It's only those dratted Loors. They always make that row just before dawn."

"Loors?"

"Sort of priests or something, you'll soon get used to the noise." She rolled over on her side, pulling the sheet over her head, indignant at having been disturbed.

But Kitti could not sleep any more. The wailing died away presently and was succeeded by the call to prayer from the minaret, and soon from the window of their room she could see the milky fume of daybreak over the city. Bullock-carts came rattling over the cobbles, villagers in from the country with fresh vegetables to

sell, she guessed from the cracking of whips, strange oaths and deep-throated hoicking and spitting. Window-shutters clattered open down the street, women called to each other with harsh voices, babies squealed, scented water hissed on the dusty road. But even when the sun had risen and burned like a smoky gong above the coiling smoke-wreaths of the city, Kitti still trembled to think of that terrifying wailing she had heard; and at breakfast she asked Mrs. Ironside if she had heard it too.

"Heard it? Of course I did. You have to be as heavy a sleeper as my husband to sleep through that din. My gracious though, I was frightened when I heard it the first night. It's some priests they say, though I must say it seems to me a funny way to pray, just howling 'Loohoo' or whatever it is. Still, you get used to it."

"Priests? . . ."

"Mary-John can tell you about them."

"Oh yes, that ay can. They're a special sort of body-guard of young priests that the Pir has always round him and they greet the sun with that noise, which is supposed to be a very old magic cry. And as it's a sound something like 'Loohoor' people nicknamed them the Loors. You see them in the town sometimes,

but they have their faces veiled with black cloth up to the eyes. It seems," he went on enthusiastically, "that they are all chosen for their good looks. Isn't that an exciting thought? But it's rather a shame that their faces should be muffled up like that. A Muhammadan friend of mine," he added casually and rather fruitily, "tells me that their skins are so pale and transparent that if they take a sip of wine you can see the rosy flush travel slowly down their throats."

"He must have been pulling your leg, that friend of yours," said Mrs. Ironside, helping herself to marmalade. "Oh George, you've spilt some tea on the cloth and it's a clean one."

"Sorry dear, but the tea's so hot and it spilt when I was pouring some in the saucer."

Mrs. Ironside shook her head and sighed. No matter in how savage a spot she found herself she insisted on living in what she called an English way; clean table-cloths, eggs and marmalade for breakfast, cold meat and pickles for lunch. Even when the temperature rose to a hundred and twenty she knew George would be disappointed if he didn't get his beef and beer at midday. And she always tried to make their bedroom look nice and "homey". She had made pretty bedspreads and dressing-

table covers by buying a few yards of cheap cloth in the bazar, cutting them into suitable lengths, stitching lace all round the edge, and sewing little blue bows to each corner.

When it was time for breakfast the beds were covered with bedspreads and hidden behind a cheap rep screen, clothes folded up and stowed in drawers, and the dressing-table despoiled of its mirror, pulled out into the middle of the room, and used as a dining-table. Mrs. Ironside boiled the eggs herself on a little primus-stove which was then hidden away in a cupboard, wherein were also her boots and shoes, veiled discreetly by a small chintz curtain.

After breakfast Mrs. Ironside donned an old *topi*, to which she gave a touch of femininity by a long grey veil, and with a basket on her arm went out to do her shopping in the bazar, holding up with one hand her lavender skirt which she always wore very long, and which, with her narrow waist, gave her an air of an old maid in some cathedral town, as though she liked to show how different she really was from the fast and dashing female in tights who nightly had apples shot off her head. Meanwhile the Captain would lie back in a deck-chair and study a paper-backed detective novel. His

brother-in-law sent him a parcel of them at intervals from England—"Mind-fodder," the Captain called them, as though to disclaim highbrow ambitions, but adding, "you might call me a book-worm and it's a fact. Give me a book and I'm happy all day." When Mrs. Ironside returned from her shopping he explained to her the progress of the story, while she nodded. "Well, well! Did he really? Oh, I'm sure you're right; it must have been the bishop who committed the murder. But what a thing for the bishop to do! Very awkward for his parishioners."

"It's a rattling fine yarn, this one. Beats me where these writer-chaps get their ideas from. I've often thought I'd like to write a novel, but the plot would always stump me. You have to make it all up you see. After all, in real life all those interesting things never happen. You wouldn't get such fun out of reading if they did. Real life's all much of a sameness isn't it?"

He stretched, got up and walked over to the window. The city lay still under the distended noon, all the life and movement of the morning quietened now. As always, a negro spearman stood sentinel on the roof of the Pir's palace. He wore a scarlet turban and scarlet loin-cloth; his sweat-shiny body gleamed blue-black in the

sun. Somewhere in the recesses of the palaces a tom-tom beat softly, fumblingly, as though played on with gloved hands. On long poles, tapering over the dome of the shrine, black and scarlet flags strained in the sand-laden wind. And far away, along the skyline, the frontier hills, a pale wash of Segonzac brown, heaven-bloomed.

After lunch they closed the window shutters and rested. It was generally too hot to sleep, so they lay on their backs, sweating; staring up at the flaking ceiling; at intervals waving away the flies; waiting, waiting for the heat to ease.

At five they had tea and then dressed for the circus.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ON the following day Kitti went down to see the old prostitute who had befriended her the morning of her arrival in Pir-jo-Goth. She found many of the booths and huts dismantled already. The fair was over and the city would return to its usual torpor. Outside the hut of Kitti's friend a camel was kneeling while the camel-driver, his foot against the creature's flank, heaved a heavy box into place beside the saddle and secured it with a rope.

"Your bed now," he called out, and Kitti's friend came to the door of her hut.

"Well, this is a surprise!" she said as soon as she saw Kitti. "I thought I shouldn't see you again. Why didn't you come yesterday you naughty girl?"

Kitti told her that now she had got employment with an English circus and had been too busy practising her new-learned dance to come, and the kindly old thing smiled delightedly to hear of her success.

"Of course, they admired your dancing. As soon as I saw you I thought to myself, well, she may be a bit lean, but I expect she's very active.

No, I've given up dancing a long time ago. Well, it's a great nuisance having to practise isn't it? Let me see, I wonder if I've got any more milk for you."

"No, please don't trouble." And Kitti told her she had already breakfasted. "Really English meals we have. And I'm learning to use a knife and fork. The Saheba—she's been so kind to me so I have to agree—says it's dirty to eat with one's fingers."

"Knife and fork? Well!" The old woman, her hands on her hips, gazed admiringly at Kitti. "You are getting on aren't you? Well, it'll all come in useful if you ever catch some young Nawab. They all like a bit of English stuff nowadays. Not eat with one's fingers? Well, that sounds funny when you come to think of it, doesn't it? Of course, I'm too old-fashioned really. What was good enough for me when I was a child is good enough for me now. But you're quite right to take advantage of your opportunities. Oh I expect one day you'll be a famous dancer in Lahore, and I'll hear all the young men talking admiringly of you. And you'll never remember poor old me."

"Of course I shall. If ever I'm rich you'll come and live with me for as long as you like," and she gave her an affectionate hug. The old

woman began to cry softly. They were interrupted by the camel-driver who asked angrily how much longer they expected him to wait.

"Oh dear, oh dear. Well, what an old silly I am." She wiped her eyes with the fringe of her sari. "Yes, the man's quite right. I ought to be starting if I'm to reach Shahpur before evening. All right Jut, you needn't shout like that. Yes, here's the bed. Well, you can give me a hand to help lift it, can't you?"

Together they lifted the string cot and tied it onto the camel.

"Well child, it's good-bye now I'm afraid. I hope we meet again."

They embraced, tears in the old woman's eyes.

"Khoda hafiz," they said. "God will keep you. Khoda hafiz."

The old woman climbed onto the camel and sat astride, her sari drawn over her enormous buttocks. She crouched forward, clutching the pommel of the double saddle, looking like a frog about to spring.

The camel rose abruptly and jolted down towards the open plain.

"Khoda hafiz" called out Kitti and heard the faint answering echo.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KITTI'S life was now very happy. The ridiculous hula-dance that she did twice nightly was no tax on her strength or imagination. Every now and then the Captain, who liked to think of himself as a great ballet-master, gave Kitti half an hour's training. She would do the steps exactly as she had always done them, but the Captain would turn to Mrs. Ironside, who would be quietly knitting in a corner of the room, and cry, "Oh, she's coming on wonderfully, isn't she Mother?"

The circus-tent was more crowded now that Kitti's beauty was known in the bazar, and she always had to run the gauntlet of a crowd of Mussulman youths when she left the stage and ran off to her own tent to change. If they called out to her, suggesting various rendezvous, she would answer with the coarse repartees she had learnt from Bali. There would be a roar of laughter and the forward admirer would retire, overwhelmed by his friends' teasing. Mary-John was deeply impressed by the effect of her gibes, and, as he said he too was always pestered by followers, she taught him some of

her most virulent phrases with which he was as pleased as a child, repeating them over and over again and sometimes trying them out on inoffensive and respectable citizens he happened to pass in the bazar. One night as the troupe returned home Vera's husband, the mechanic, happened to walk beside Kitti, falling into step with her. He could talk pleasantly enough and Kitti, who was fast picking up English, laughed at his jokes and enjoyed exchanging simple chaff with him. At the door of the shop where they lodged he said good-night and went off with the Captain.

Kitti scampered up to her bedroom, flung open the door and found Vera waiting for her, white with passion.

"I saw you," she began in a shrill grating voice, "laughing and talking together, walking just behind the others so that you wouldn't be noticed. You thought I wouldn't see because I went on ahead. But you thought wrong. I saw you from the window. I saw you." She came nearer, her fists clenched.

"How silly you are," Kitti laughed, and then when Vera persisted she became angry and told her that she wouldn't think of returning the affections of a mere mechanic, whereat Vera burst into tears and bounced on to her

bed, and refused to speak a word to Kitti the following day.

Kitti at first thought it was only another of Vera's unreasoning fits of jealousy but presently she noticed that the mechanic was paying her much attention, always manœuvring to sit next her at meals, walking back with her from the circus and hinting at possible meetings *à deux*, leaning towards her his grey half-caste's face like a mask, lifeless save for the wicked little eyes. She tried to avoid him, refusing to acknowledge his rather obvious attempts at gallantry, running forward and talking with assumed intensity to Mary-John whenever the half-caste tried to walk beside her. But he was persistent. She could feel his eyes on her while she ate, was always aware of him near. And all the time Vera wandered about like a ghost, her face drawn and her eyes red with weeping, darting glances of hatred at Kitti.

Kitti was distressed, for she was not in the least attracted by the mechanic and was afraid that if, to avoid his insistence, she let him have what he wanted there would be a great fuss and she might have to leave the troupe. She confided in Mrs. Ironside.

"Oh, the silly boy. I didn't know he was worrying you so much. I'll speak to him dear.

Don't you bother your head about it. As for Vera she'll soon recover. We have this sort of thing happening every now and then. The boy'll be all right when we move somewhere gayer. He was always one for the girls and gay life. It's dull for him here."

"Dull!" exclaimed the Captain who happened to come in at that moment. "I should damn well think it is dull. Dead and buried, the whole damn town. D'you know that last night's takings showed a dead loss? I've just been counting them."

"Oh George, how dreadful! Are you sure? The circus tent always seemed fairly full."

"I dare say. But all the booths and shooting-ranges and roundabouts hardly got any customers after the first night or two. I tell you I'm damned worried about it. If things don't get better we'll have to move on."

"But where, darling?"

"Oh God, I don't know. If I did, I'd pack up to-morrow and leave."

"Oh don't fret George. You can't judge by one night's takings. There may have been some other attraction."

"Can't judge! You think I can't judge? My good girl, d'you imagine I've been all these years in the entertainment business and still

can't judge when a show's not drawing properly?"

"No dear, I don't mean that. I only meant that one doesn't always know all the circumstances. At any rate see what happens to-night and to-morrow before getting worried. After all, no good was ever done by fretting, was it?"

She smiled up at the Captain, but he was in no mood for consolation. He said "Oh God, damn and blast," and some other things and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Mrs. Ironside sighed, and putting on her spectacles again took up her knitting.

"The Captain does worry so. It's a pity. Everything always comes right in the end. But you see he's so keen on his job. It's not the money he cares about, but it hurts him to get no public recognition when he's put so much *into* his show. I mean, there're not many managers of travelling circuses with such high standards as the Captain. Won't stand anything cheap or shoddy. Give the public the best has always been his motto. And it is disappointing to find the public turning you a cold shoulder. I quite understand how he feels. But what's the good of worrying? I always say, Trust to Provi-

dence and you can't go far wrong. It's what my mother taught me and I'm grateful to her. Christian Resignation, she called it. By the way, what is your religion dear?"

Kitti hesitated a moment. "Hindu, I suppose." After all she had always called herself a Hindu without understanding much by that. But then there was Hashim Shah. And with a shock she realised how completely the thought of that saint had passed from her mind. And those dreams that had come to her in the contagious company of the pilgrims . . . gone, gone. No, but really . . . she pursed her lips, accusing herself of levity and thoughtless frivolity. And she determined to go that very morning to the shrine and try to recreate her earlier devotion. She excused herself to Mrs. Ironside and ran out into the bazar.

The streets were crowded, as always before noon, and Kitti walked along happily, amused by the noise and animation, the endless bargaining at the shops, the doctors squatting in the road with rows of coloured medicine-bottles in front of them, naked little children romping and rolling in the dust. She had stopped in front of a sweet-stall, tempted by the golden-whorled *jellabies* and Shikarpur candy-balls, when a sudden shouting made her turn round.

At the far end of the street, above the heads of the crowd, black pennons flutteringly advanced. People began shouting "Pir Saheb Shahin Shah! Mubarak! Mubarak! Allah salamat rakhe!" and as the crowd slowly parted, the men bowing and beating their breasts, faces filling each window, craning out and crying blessings, Kitti saw a tall youth in a long gown of black. "Why, it must be one of the Loors" she said to herself in sudden excitement, for his face was veiled up to the eyes with black cloth and even his kohl-lined eyes were shadowed by his heavy turban. He carried a heavy staff of coloured wood and walked slowly, hieratically. And after him came the Pir riding on a white pony, a red umbrella nodding over his head. From each side of the saddle hung two golden chains, holding which the Pir's Khalifas directed the progress of the meek little pony.

"Allah-O-Akbar!" yelled the crowd in rising frenzy. "Allah Tohar!"

The Pir's pony passed quite close to Kitti, and as she shrank back in a spasm of superstitious fear the prophet's head moved and his eyes rested on her. They were dark drugged eyes under lashless rough lids like a parrot's.

He murmured to one of his Khalifas "Who is she?" and the man without even looking at

Kitti whispered back "I shall find out, Protector of Slaves," and then, smoothing the folds of scarlet brocade over his stomach with an unctuous gesture, he walked mincingly on, directing the progress of his master's pony with his golden chain.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE Pir lay in the darkness of his bedroom, vast, half naked, sweating, while his favourite Abdulla massaged him. The slender boy leant over him, running his nimble fingers over the great flabby folds and pouches of the Pir's body, lightly stroking the rolling curves of his thighs, evoking tremors and grunts of delight from the holy man.

The Pir was in a good humour. Nothing had happened that morning to disturb him. He had as usual issued forth from his palace at dawn, to pray in the shrine, leaning his vast bulk upon a painted stick and supported by his Khalifas. He bowed his forehead upon the marble floor of the shrine's courtyard and recited the ritual prayers. Then his Khalifas helped him to his feet; and he ordered his bed to be brought out, and lolling back upon the stained and tattered cushions prepared to hear the complaints of his people. Sometimes an applicant would cry out that his neighbour had built for himself a new lavatory from the window of which he was in the habit of peeping into the women's quarters next door. Another

would report Haji Jafar as a secret cigarette smoker or Achar Khoso as a drunkard. These were serious offences among the orthodox in the town of Pir-jo-Goth and the Pir would pass judgement accordingly. A man proved to have fallen from grace might be tied up, stripped naked before his women, and flogged till he fainted.

Sometimes, hearing of some even graver backsliding, the Pir would fall into a rage and rising ponderously from his couch stagger towards the culprit, his eyes flashing, his body shaking with passion.

"Eh, eh, you pig," he would bellow, "is it true, you Kafir and son of a Kafir, is it true what they say of you?"

The poor man would fall on his knees, and grovelling try to kiss the feet of the Pir.

"Shah Saheb, O Shahin Shah, I am poor and wretched and helpless. Do not believe my enemies. My brother had run away with the wife of Sumar's cousin; therefore Sumar makes this accusation against me."

Sometimes the Pir would believe him, sometimes his anger would rise to an overmastering fury.

"Aré, incestuous son of a bitch, do you answer me back? Here, call my Loors! Where are

the women-folk of this filth? Drag them out of his house and throw them to my stallions. Ha! I will show you. . . .”

But such storms were fortunately rare, and to-day no serious complaints had disturbed his calm. And, to add to his content, had come the news that morning that a very important follower was coming to pay him homage, Khan Alaudin Khan, the Prime Minister of His Highness of Makran. He had sent him a letter written in the most exquisite *shikasteh* characters upon gold paper, begging for the privilege of a *darsaniyyah*.¹ There would be rich presents and much renown. It was gratifying, this demonstration of religious enthusiasm in a prince of so distant a country, a lesson to all of us in this age of unbelief, when Kafirs openly mock at the True Faith and even the orthodox are niggardly in their tribute. Oh, a wonderful example of faith and constancy, devotion and . . .

“But what is the man *really* coming for?” he wheezed, and Abdulla, who knew everything, smiled his entrancing oblique smile.

“The Shahin Shah really desires to know?”

“Why, yes.”

“The Khan Saheb desires a son. He has

¹ Ceremonial of feasting one's eyes on a religious leader.

tried all kinds of medicine. Now he hopes that the Shahin Shah will give him some magic writing which will procure him his wish."

"A son? Oh yes, of course. This Khan when he was young . . ." and the Pir broke off into choking laughter.

After his massage the Pir felt soothed. An enormous drowsiness always weighed on him through the long afternoons. He had to rest after his midday meal of *palaw*, steaming mounds of spicy rice, plates of saffron rice with almonds and raisins, sweet *khichdi* rice with eggs and fish, *biriani* rice luscious with spinach and melted fat, *samboosa* pastries, layers of *chapattis* and bowls of bitter curds. He would dip his beringed fingers into the innumerable bowls one after the other and lift the greasy handfuls to his mouth, chewing with earnest greed, sucking every grain of rice from his fingers and then wiping his hands upon his yellow silk trousers.

After his massage followed a long coma when he lay motionless among his cushions, breathing heavily and dreaming vague golden dreams of swelling breasts and mountainous hips, and of boys with curling eyelashes who swayed like willows as they walked.

In the cool of the evening Abdulla brought

tea and offered the Pir his tonic, a pale yellow liquid which he poured out of an earthen jug. The Pir's enemies were accustomed to hint that this medicine was nothing but neat brandy, but, whatever it was, it was understood that the Pir only took it for the sake of his health. When he was refreshed and dressed and his enormous white turban tied to his satisfaction, he called for his Khalifas. They filed in, kissing his feet in turn, and he ordered a portion of Hashim Shah's "Risalo" to be read. This was a long epic poem describing the exploits of the Pir's ancestor. The book was brought and unrolled from the silks in which it was wrapped. The Pir leant forward and pressed his forehead, his eyes and his lips against the covers of the book, and then ordered the reading to begin.

The Chief Khalifa selected a passage and began to read, moaning out the sonorous Persian phrases and rocking to and fro with the rhythm of the verse.

He read about the loves of Hashim and Saada. The King of Baluchistan was an infidel and persecuted all the followers of the True Faith. But his daughter, the Princess Saada, was the loveliest woman in the world, and all the Princes of Asia competed for her hand. Now she was as proud and cruel as her father, and boasted

that she could only marry a Prince who came riding to her upon a wild tiger. When Hashim heard of that he laughed aloud and, bowing before his master the Emir Tamerlane, then reigning gloriously in Samarkand, he begged of him permission to win the lady's hand. The Emir smiled in his beard and consented. Then Hashim leapt upon a tiger, and scourging it with a cobra rode rapidly to Baluchistan. When Saada saw him coming all her pride melted within her. She prostrated herself before the saintly hero and said, "My lord, you have fairly won me. Take me, I am your slave." But the Baluch king was furious that his daughter had thus pledged herself to a Musulman, and he cast her into a deep well, covering the mouth of it with a rock as high as a mountain, such as all the armies of the world would be unable to move. So Hashim rode sadly back to Samarkand and related the misfortune of his lady to the Lord Tamerlane. And the Emir felt pity for the youth and a tear stole down his beard and he said: "My son, take my magic horse Dhul-Dhul with you and tell him to dance upon the rock." So Hashim returned to Baluchistan riding upon Dhul-Dhul; and when he came to that great rock he dismounted and prayed to Allah, the most merciful

and compassionate. Then he arose and cried, "O Dhul-Dhul, dance upon the rock." So Dhul-Dhul bounded on to the rock and danced till the whole earth shook with the thunder of his hoofs. And the rock split open; and Saada came up out of the well and rode away safely with her lover.

The Pir nodded to himself as the music of the Persian verse rolled on. He too was a great lover like his ancestor Hashim Shah; he smiled and drew his fat bejewelled hands slowly down over his chest. . . .

Presently he said "This Khan will expect some entertainment."

"Surely," the Chief Khalifa answered, "the vision of his Murshid is sufficient entertainment for one who comes in all humility to lay his turban at the Shah's feet?"

"True. But these worldly people are not always of that opinion. He no doubt fancies himself a great personage, to be entertained as such. He will expect dancing-women from Lahore. . . ." The Pir sighed. He was mean and hated spending money.

The Chief Khalifa at once shook his head. "Lahore? The Shah is too good. There must be suitable women much nearer."

"Nearer? Yes. . . . Didn't you tell me that

that girl we passed in the bazar the other day was a dancer?"

"It seems she does English dances."

"I'm sure the Khan would like that. Yes . . . now read some more. No, I'd like to have some music. Send me one of the Roshaniyyeh." The Roshaniyyeh or Initiates were the veiled young men, the Loors.

A young Loor came in carrying a single-stringed lute. He kissed the Pir's feet, squatted on the floor, and began plucking the string of his lute while his lips moved as he tried over to himself various melodies. Finally he chose the famous quatrain of Shah Latif:

"Satan is the only true Lover.

All others are mere prattlers.

Out of his love for the King of Heaven

That shining one embraced destruction."

The Pir sat stiffly on his couch, frozen into rapt attention. His pouchy face softened with a simple childish smile and two tears, rolling slowly down his sweat-dewed cheeks, trembled on the bristles of his moustache. The song filled him with a wave of religious awe and emotion. He gazed up at the ceiling and murmured the verse of Sa'adi: "Not to myself am I so near as He! Not to myself am I so near as He!"

The evening call to prayer rang out from the shrine, and the Pir, tumbling off his couch, very humbly prostrated his forehead to the dust, his whole soul pouring forth in an ecstasy of worship.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE Captain recovered from his depression when he heard of the approaching visit of the Khan Alaudin.

"There are sure to be more grand doings when he's here, and people will come in from the country, and we'll be sure to have some really good takings."

His enthusiasm infected the troupe. They laughed and joked over their tea, and Mrs. Ironside, beaming happily at her "family" ranged on either side of the table in her bedroom, urged them to have more cups of tea, adding that she might have baked a cake if she'd thought of it.

"Or some scones," cried the Captain. "What's wrong with scones?"

"Yes, they'd have been nice, and quite easy to make. Oh dear, I wish I'd thought of it. Never mind, we can have them to-morrow. It's never too late to celebrate good news, is it?"

Kitti asked where Mekran was, this state whose Vizier was honouring the Pir-jo-Goth with his visit, and they told her "Oh, somewhere along the sea, south of Baluchistan."

"Well, it's to be hoped he'll be worth looking at," Kitti said to Vera as they changed into their dancing clothes. "After all the fuss that's being made in the town about his coming. Triumphal arches and all. D'you think he'll come and see us dance?"

"Always looking about for a man, aren't you?" Vera snapped. "Why on earth should he come and see us? I bet they'll hire some of the best Lahore dancing women to amuse him."

Kitti sighed. "I expect you're right. But I wish sometimes—hullo, there's the Captain calling."

They hurried on to the stage, the curtains jolted aside and they began their hula.

Almost from the first Kitti noticed a strange something in the air, something odd emanating from the audience. The tent seemed fuller than usual. All the back benches seemed occupied. She twirled round one corner of the stage, where she was in shadow, out of the glare of the acetylene footlights, and from there she glanced quickly over the audience. With an almost physical shock she saw that in the last row of the audience were sitting, as rigid as idols, four of the mysterious Loors, veiled and muffled as always. And then she began to understand the tension in the air. Wherever

she moved she felt their eyes on her, eyes moving slowly in their narrow cage between the folds of black. Why had they come? Why were they watching her with such insistence? She felt the sweat start up on her forehead and stumbled over her dance. She could almost have wept with relief when the curtains squeaked across and hid her from their watching malice. For a moment she felt safe in the shadow of the curtain-darkened stage. Then the Captain bustled on with a whispered "I say Kitti, can you do an Indian dance? There's a message from the audience asking you to do some Indian dancing—you understand me, don't you?—Hindustani nautch you know."

"Yes, I understand," she said. "But I have no proper dancing-dress. Only an ordinary sari that I wear always."

"That'll do. Hurry and put it on, like a good girl."

She came back dressed in her sari and stood trembling on the stage waiting for the curtains to part, waiting trembling in the comfortable darkness. And then she was in the full glare, and the audience stirred a little and she felt the eyes of the Loors on her. But they were less hostile now.

They must have hated my hula-dress, she

thought, and agreed to herself that it was barbarous. I shall dance the Moon-Bird dance she decided. She raised her arms slowly and stood rigid, but trembling a little still. She began to sing softly of the *chakor*, the magic bird who in the depths of elfin forests sings one exquisite song each midnight, and whose sole nourishment is the camphor-oozing radiance of the moon. And she began slowly to dance, her arms outstretched above her, her head bent back, a rapt moon-worshipper. She *was* the *chakor*, she felt the tiny bird-life stir in her, she felt the sheen of starlight glimmer along her downy form, and oh, the stir of wings, the quiver and ripple of bird-wings, starting at the caress of an orchid-brooding wind. The soft moon-radiance stole down about her like a Danaan rain. She drank it in with every pore, she was healed and reborn in that cool dew. She sank upon the stage, the moon-bird limp and sated, his song sung and his nightly homage achieved.

The audience stirred, were moved and cried out hoarsely, but she turned and ran, weak with the emotion of her dance.

When she left her tent again she saw the Captain talking to one of the Loors.

He called out to her, "I've got an engage-

ment for you, young lady. The Pir Saheb wants you to dance at the party he's giving for Khan Alaudin."

The Loor, who had not understood but recognised the names and so the purport of the Captain's remarks, nodded slowly. He looked full at Kitti, his eyes motionless, encircled and enlarged with kohl. The sympathy of her dancing moment had gone. She felt a calm hatred, half envious and half afraid, surging towards her from the young Initiate's swaddled masculinity.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN the far corner of the Pir's palace, away from the shrine, was an open courtyard. On one side against the palace itself a deep loggia, on the other a blank wall beyond which could be heard the noises of the street. Above the pillars of the loggia were Persian tiles, exquisite in the delicacy of their patterns, the trailing foliage and nodding flowers, all of a wonderful blue, peacock-blue and smoky purple, and the lovely blue of Meshed. Someone, the Pir or his father perhaps, had started planting a garden in this courtyard, but had soon abandoned it, and now only remained a few deciduous trees in whose shadow pariah-dogs nuzzled among heaps of rags and broken glass and human excrement.

It was in this loggia that the Pir entertained his more distinguished visitors.

From noon servants were busy preparing for the Khan's arrival, sprinkling rose-water over the dusty courtyard, spreading over the tiled floor of the loggia dark-bloomed Baluch rugs—with their invariable pattern of the branching

Tree of Life—setting upon occasional tables of carved blackwood bowls of pale hill-roses. The Pir's swing, an enormous affair like a gallows, all of crimson lacquer, with a cushioned seat upon which he squatted majestically, was dragged into place at one end of the loggia against the carpet-hung wall. In front of it was set a table with a silver jar of attar of roses and a little spoon beside it. Then at a distance, facing the swing, a stiff sofa for the Khan; and then the hookahs, one by the swing and one by the sofa, their blue china bowls filled with rose-water, and their silver trays piled with charcoal; the mouthpieces of black ebony hung with silver chains had to be polished, so the servants spat on them and rubbed them briskly with their shirt-tails.

Towards evening the musicians came, squatted down on the steps of the loggia, fumbled in their sashes for betel-nut and cardamom to chew, searched their turbans hopefully for a stray cigarette.

As they tuned their instruments—great gourd-shaped *sitars* and many-stringed *sarangis*—they discussed the morning's meeting of the Pir and the Khan.

"It was a great *tamasha*, wasn't it?"

"No doubt, and those two hunting cheetahs

that the Khan brought as presents for our Pir Saheb, they were wonderful beasts. . . .”

One of the Khalifas appeared in the loggia, officiously scolding the servants and criticising their work.

“Was your mother a blind woman mated with a cripple that you can’t see how dirty this floor is?”

“Presence, I sprinkled rose-water very thoroughly there.”

The *sitar*-player, who was a young boy, began asking the grey-bearded drummer, “How much do you think an English suit costs—one like the Khan was wearing?”

“Ya Allah, how should I know? But evidently a lot. Perhaps as much as four hunting-dogs or a she-camel.”

“Wah! It is incredible. How rich the Khan must be. I should be nervous to be wearing the price of a she-camel on my back.”

The Khalifa broke in, “Hey, who gave you leave to open your mouth, filth? You, a wretched little musician daring to discuss the Khan Saheb’s clothes. . . . You talk too much and too loudly.”

The *sitar*-player grinned sheepishly and, hanging his head, pretended to be absorbed in tuning his instrument. The *sarangist*, a fat creature who was jealous of the boy, stared at him re-

provingly and presently began to explain the situation.

"You see, you foolish child, you were talking too much. Now the Khalifa Saheb has scolded you. Small boys talk too much and then their elders rebuke them. That is how things are."

Beyond the far wall cartmen shouted and whips cracked. Cow-bells and camel-bells tolled and jangled. The country-folk were going home from market. On the roof of the Pir's palace the negro guard was changed; spear-hafts thudded dully on the dried mud of the roof, negro voices called reedily, exploded in sudden cackles. It was evening and then night; already night. Servants brought petrol-lamps and set them about the loggia on empty brandy-cases. They leant against the pillars, restlessly fidgeting. The Pir Saheb will come soon. As soon as it was dark, he said. . . . There, that's his step, and the shuffling of the Khalifas.

The Pir came heavily in, leaning on a Khalifa, and was helped into his swing. He sat there cross-legged, his face deeply shadowed by his enormous turban, a still dead face with dark hollows under the cheekbones, the head set squarely on a flabby sweating neck. He had been using a cheap pink face-powder, which had spilt over his silk scarf and lay in faint flecks over

his embroidered waistcoat. A Khalifa stood behind him, stirring the swing. The wires wheezed and the tall bamboo shafts like gallows creaked as the strange hieratic creature, obesely squatting, moved gently to and fro.

Khan Alaudin was shown to his sofa. Servants knelt and unlaced his English shoes and substituted velvet Turkish slippers. He sat back, crossed his legs like an Englishman, took out a gold cigarette-case and tapped a cigarette smartly on the lid. He was very thin and his skin an unhealthy grey. He stared about him with quick nervous movements of his head, turning jerkily his tight protruding face, a face like a lizard's. The servants watched him covertly, the famous Khan, Vizier of Mekran. They all knew his story, of course; how he was the son of a carpet-seller of Quetta, and how, when he was still a boy, he had been spreading his father's wares over the pavement in the bazar and the Nawab of Mekran had chanced to come riding by. Pleased with the boy's appearance he had bought him from his father. Slave, favourite, minister, and now, in the dotage of the childless Nawab, all-powerful mayor of the palace—such had been his career. To his many sonorous Persian titles the British Government had added that of O.B.E. for his

benevolent attitude during the War. Hesat, very straight and thin, looking about him with small bright eyes. In the wall beside him was a lovely Persian tile, fifteenth century he guessed. All round it the old tiles had been replaced with modern Multan ware, enamel greens and liquorice browns, and this exquisite blue aristocrat glimmered alone. Three Persian princesses were watching a flight of wild swans in the sky: delicious little princesses on a cushioned balcony, their flower-faces bent under the weight of tall Sassanian crowns, princesses with long sad eyes and cyclamen-coloured flesh. The Khan sighed with pleasure and felt the surface of the tile with his soft beringed fingers. He loved beautiful things with feminine passion. It gave him a stab of heartache to see those little Persian princesses and the long-necked purple swans, all so tiny and exquisite, wreathed with blue arabeasques.

He turned away and said to his servant, who stood with folded arms behind his sofa, "Fetch me some lemonade."

The servant brought a strong whiskey-and-soda and the Khan as he sipped it said, "Lemonade is so refreshing isn't it?"

The Pir ordered some cocoanut milk and soda for himself.

There was a long awkward pause while host and distinguished guest fidgeted with their drinks and avoided meeting each other's eyes. The various notables of the town and the few village *sardars* honoured with an invitation whispered polite nothings.

"What is the news?"

"All good news, praise be to God."

"The crops good?"

"Owing to the benign favour of Pir Saheb."

The musicians waited patiently for their cue. At last the Chief Khalifa bent forward and whispered in the Pir's ear. He nodded and the Khalifa made a sign to the musicians who struck long resonant chords on *sitar* and *sarangi*. Then Abdulla ran in to dance. He wore a short gold waistcoat and a pleated skirt reaching to his toes. He began to spin wildly in a savage Baluch dance, his square-cut page's hair rising above his ears as his head swung drunkenly, his skirt rippling in long waves and lifting slowly, round and round, higher and higher, above the ankles, with their bells that jangled as he stamped, above the knees, till it stood out straight from the waist like a pierrette's, and the thin brown legs spun faster than eye could follow. The *sitar* thrummed and rang, the drums throbbed maddeningly; and

Abdulla's face was transfigured with savage excitement: you caught a glimpse of the whites of his eyes and his sharp teeth from which the lips had receded in a fixed grin, the whole face tight-drawn and fever-flushed, framed between the swinging plumes of his buttered hair. He stopped at the very climax of the melody, stopped with a clap of his hands and a wild shout, and the hair fell disordered about his face.

Everyone loudly applauded. There was no doubt Abdulla danced admirably. And one must show one's appreciation of his skill for he is the Pir's favourite now. . . .

Then followed two clowns.

They wore tall steeple-hats of red felt, and began shouting and jostling each other to attract attention. Then one of the clowns lay down while the other said, "Look, a *bania* asleep." The clown illustrated this character by drawing his knees up to his chin, his whole body shaking with a hacking cough, as he gabbled in his sleep about "interest" and "sale-deeds" and "mortgages." Suddenly the *bania* wakes up. "What's that noise?" he gasps, and coughs and peers about him blinking, his lower lip twitching. The clown imitated the *bania's* terror with exaggerated pantomime. He clambered to his feet, and stood with knees knocking

together. Then he gave a scream. "A burglar and he's getting at my money! Oh, you rascal!" He leapt forward, clutched at something, and then rolled over and over on the floor. Finally he sat up, rubbing his bruises, and murmured between sobs of relief and pain, "Well, thank God, it was only a cat and the money is safe."

"Wah! Wah!" The audience was greatly amused. "Just like a *bania*."

Next the two clowns imitated a Hindu arriving at a police station to report to the Sub-Inspector the outbreak of a communal riot. The Sub-Inspector was represented as a Punjabi with huge curling moustaches and a vile accent.

"Hi, you lavatory-cleaner, what are you doing, defiling my doorstep with your presence?" he shouts, twirling his moustache.

"Sir, well, Sir, your honour, Presence . . ." begins the Hindu snivellingly.

"Eunuch, what is this—am I to stand here all day? Get on—or may I defile your sister—get on and tell your story."

"Sir, you know, Sir, I am a poor, good man. As you can see, Sir, I am simply too poor, and very, very good. . . ."

"Ya Allah, what is all this buk-buk? Here,

come inside. I am just having some furniture moved. Come and give me a hand."

So the *bania* is pushed protesting into the Sub-Inspector's quarters and made to lift huge tables, under the weight of which he always collapses; whereon the Sub-Inspector shouts: "Allah Tohar! See how these Hindus treat us, coming into our houses and breaking our furniture."

Finally, when all the furniture the *bania* was trying to move is smashed, the *bania* begins his tale again.

"Sir, as I was saying, there is a riot . . ."

"Riot!" shouts the Sub-Inspector, visibly alarmed. "Why didn't you say so at first?"

"Well, Commander Saheb, your honour was graciously pleased . . ."

"Go on, go on, tell me about the riot."

"Well, Sir, we poor good Hindus were living quietly in our quarter and some Mussulmans came and there was a fight. Sir, there were only fifty of us poor Hindus, and there were as many as three Mussulmans."

"Three!"

"Well, Sir, two really. But one of them had a heavy stick, which makes three."

This scene was received with uproarious applause and the clowns went round the loggia,

holding out their hats for contributions. Khan Alaudin flicked them a ten-rupee note which they received with protestations of undying devotion. "We shall not be able to sleep at night, Protector of Slaves, for our zeal in praying for your honour's long life, prosperity and many male children." There were covert sniggers behind the pillars at the sting at the end of this peroration.

When the clowns had gone there was another pause. The Pir and his guest were too far apart to make conversation, and the Pir was already dozing, his hands splayed out over his stomach, his huge white turban nodding gently. The Chief Khalifa stood behind him with folded arms, and at his feet Abdulla lay like a young panther in repose. Khan Alaudin selected another cigarette. They were gold-tipped, and the *sitar*-player craned forward with goggling eyes at this new evidence of Western dissipation. Suits the price of a she-camel and gold-tipped cigarettes. . . .

At last dinner was announced. The Pir remained squatting on his swing (for it was not proper that a holy man should be observed eating by the vulgar) but the Khan sprang up with sudden alacrity. In an inner room a table had been laid in Western style with table-cloth and

a few spoons and forks. A crowd of servants hung about by the door, their numbers reinforced by peasants recruited for the day, who stood about gaping, crumpling and uncrumpling their shirts, fidgeting with their turbans. Plates fell with a clatter outside the door, there were hissed rebukes and whispered prayers for pardon. The petrol-lamp on the table began to burn dim, to pop and fume. Everyone called to the servants. The lamp was pumped and then flared with a harsh white light. Flying insects began to collect, horrible soft grey beetles that plumped like sponges on the table and lay slowly squirming on their backs, yellow creatures that shed their wings as soon as they bumped against the light and then ran frenziedly to and fro, hundreds of whining, whirring night-flies, blister-flies and sand-flies. Servants flicked the table with their turbans; the insects rolled over struggling, hissing and murmuring, were swept on to the floor and crunched underfoot. Some new plates were brought and the dinner was served: bowls of *kawftas* swimming in hot butter, hens roasted whole in their feathers and served up coated with gold leaf and surrounded with little marzipan models of newly-hatched chickens, mutton-chops fried with spinach, potato-cakes with eggs and green

chillies, cucumbers served in curds, apples in treacle, and an enormous *palaw*, a mountain of brown rice glistening with grease, sprinkled over with raisins and almonds and cocoanut shavings, but revealing, when you plunged a spoon into the succulent mass, a dark confusion of spices and eggs and chickens' livers and mutton-kidneys and pieces of partridge, snipe, venison, *telur* and wild duck, all cooked together within the mountain of bronze-gleaming rice. There were brass platters piled with every possible variety of unleavened bread, wheaten or maize, soft with melted butter or hard and flavoured with cloves.

The town guests and village *sardars* waited for the Khan to begin, praying that he would not use a spoon and fork. As soon as his plate was filled by the servants the Khan took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and plunged his fists into the steaming mound before him. Joyfully the other guests followed his example.

Outside in the loggia the Pir swung gently, alone save for his Chief Khalifa and the boy Abdulla couched at his feet. At intervals he belched or hiccuped, for he had eaten (at his meal taken earlier and in privacy) even more than usual to support him during the *longueurs* of the evening's entertainment.

After dinner the Chief Khalifa sent word to Kitti. She had been lent a fine dancing-dress, commandeered only the Khalifa knew whence. She came out blinking into the glare of the loggia. The men squatting against the wall stirred, shifted on their buttocks, took handfuls of cardamom seeds from their sashes and leant back with nods of appreciation to each other. A pretty girl, anyway.

The musicians struck up, the drummer a long roll. A flute-player had joined them now, a young Baluch with long cork-screw curls hanging from under his turban down over his black smock, which was worked with gold and scarlet thread. The *sitar*-player stared at Kitti, a frank stare of amazed admiration, as his lean fingers slid down the shimmering strings and music throbbed in the gourd-shaped belly of his instrument.

Then suddenly they paused and waited for Kitti's directions.

"Ghazel" she said over her shoulder. The flute began, slow, high and thin, a pure reed-note, limpid and confident, without subtlety or emotion, the voice of the hill-men. And the drum followed dully, beating the blood-rhythm.

She sang one of the hill-ghazels that she had

heard in a café, a quatrain with a lilting refrain like a Spanish *copla*:

“I hear the fishergirls at dawn
Singing by the river,
Each of her lover.
But I lie alone.”

“Ah! Ah!” voices sighed. The flute repeated unwaveringly the tune, and the drum beat steadily, without violence or assertion, pulsing dully, distant and remote. “Ah! Aha!” the men sighed, and caught up the refrain “But I lie alone,” the clear thin tune that fell away in sad quartertones. Khan Alaudin drew his breath in sharply. “Ya Allah, the girl can sing.” He turned to his servant. “Kitti? What sort of name is that? We have never heard of her.”

“Another ghazel!” he cried applauding when she paused.

Kitti smiled at him, thought for a moment, and then nodded at the musicians.

“Silver in the hill-tarn,
The fishes run and play.
Nought they reck of coming drought,
Nor men of Judgment Day.”

After the hill-ghazel the palace-ghazel. She began to sing some of those infinitely complex

quatrains that Sachal and his school had composed at the courts of the last Talpur kings:

“The Sea’s trumpets greet him,
Green-robed, the mountain-born.
In the sanctuary gloom,
Hush! the pages turn.”

“Wah! Wah!” applauded the audience. “Shabash!” Smiling at each other they nodded delightedly, savouring the allusive subtlety of the verse. A river evidently; and Elijah is the green-robed prophet; so the Indus, which in popular mythology is the reincarnation of Elijah, the great river which sweeps from Himalaya to the sea. And in the last two lines a reference to the island-monastery of Bukkhar, devoted to the cult of Elijah, the Zinda Pir, the Deathless One. It is said that nightly he descends to the inner shrine there; for every morning the priests find the silken marker of their great Quran has been moved on and the book lies open at the succeeding chapter. Alone in the dark shrine the prophet hearkens to the boatmen calling upon him as their skiffs plunge perilously down the monsoon flood.

“Oh brilliant,” they smiled and complimented Kittī. Did not the Khan Saheb enjoy that ghazal?

"Excellent," he murmured, a smile passing over his tight lizard's face. "A ghazel of Sachal's I should guess. The end, the last flower of the Border culture. When Sachal was an old man they brought a little prince to see him, to be blessed by him. Such was the reverence he enjoyed that even the greatest in the land brought him their son to bless. And that child was the last Talpur king, who ended his life as a prisoner of the English."

They all nodded, sighing profoundly. A dark age, without poetry or hope, and Islam in decay.

The Pir asked his Khalifa what the Khan Saheb had said. Sachal? A good poet, no doubt, but not to be compared with our divine ancestor Hashim.

"Not for a moment," Alaudin assured him. "Hashim's 'Risalo' is incomparable. Such philosophy, such pathos, such . . ." he hesitated for the word, his fingers poised expressively. Actually he cared little for the "Risalo." That heavy brooding atmosphere of doom, the endless appeals to Fate and Nemesis, they were unnerving. Fate the Jester. . . . No, he didn't like to think of that. Luck had always been with him, would always be. Away in Mekran the old Nawab was dying and he alone stood beside him. If only he had a son. . . .

Now Kitti asked permission to dance. Both Pir and Khan nodded graciously.

"Bhairavi," she said to the musicians, and they began to play the soft Dawn Tune. Plangent the strings of the *sarangi*, plangent yet serene, lovely and water-clear, bird-song on lonely upland pastures, cow-bells and a shepherd boy piping. The melodies hung wavering on the air, were succeeded by new and lovelier. Veil on veil of shimmering translucence, the calm of vast horizons, the unearthly beauty of a mountain pool. And slowly the drum throbbed against that misty empyrean of sound, insistently gaining strength, beating upwards like a swimmer to the surface, the blood-rhythm stirring under the flow of unimpassioned harmonies.

And Kitti sang the Dawn-Song, the Bhairavi. The slow lovely music wove its patterns round her, the patterns of morning in the hills, a grey mere with mountain cattle coming down to drink, and mist among the reeds. And athwart the morning music Kitti sang, sang and danced in her fine new dancing-dress like a bright dragon-fly among the reeds.

The Khan applauded wildly. He was deeply moved. He felt in his pocket for his purse and tossed it to Kitti. It fell jingling at her feet on

the blue tiles. She picked it up with a low salaam. It was fat and heavy; there must be many rupees in it she said to herself, perhaps some notes even; and it was difficult to wait patiently till she was alone in her changing-room. Notes there were, some tens and, Allah! a fifty. How lovely to tell Vera:

“Look what the Khan gave me!”

But Vera only turned over on her bed sulkily. “Well, you deserve some reward. You take such pains to attract men’s attention.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE next day, the last of the Khan's visit, there was wrestling. Kitti on her way to the circus after tea saw the wide circle of men outside the city, a triple circle, lines of men squatting, of men standing, and of men on camel-back. She stopped to watch; "No one will come early to the circus to-night" she said to herself, "with this counter-attraction."

An orchestra of *sarangis* and drums was performing. The crowd beat time and hummed the tunes, but when the leader of the orchestra came round for money no one gave him anything. If he had played for four or five hours they would consider whether he had earned any reward or not; it would be ridiculous to pay him now; the bandsmen would get lazy and proud. So they all scolded him and told him that his band was perfectly useless and threatened to lodge complaints against him for being a common nuisance unless he went back at once and played properly. And he would laugh and say that they were ignorant rustics who could not appreciate the honour of being played to by the best string band in Northern India.

Presently the Pir rode into the arena, attended by the Khalifas all wearing scarlet turbans, long blue brocaded coats, enormous scarlet trousers and gold shoes turned up at the toes. The Pir was on his milk-white pony, and from the scarlet saddle hung the golden chains that the Khalifas held to guide the animal. A red umbrella nodded over his head. All the audience rose to their feet. A carpet of great antiquity and beauty was spread out in one corner of the arena and several lounge cushions covered with a vulgar modern cretonne piled upon it. The Pir dismounted from his pony and reclined against the cushions.

The Khan soon followed on a marvellous riding-camel with jangling silver ornaments at its neck and a silken carpet over its back. The camel knelt and Khan Alaudin joined the Pir, squatting beside him on the carpet. Though they had been conversing in the Pir's palace but five minutes past they exchanged courtesies for the benefit of the crowd.

"Allah salamat rakhe."

"Tkbal-o-khair."

They asked each other about the crops in each other's lands. Crops in Mekran, it seemed, were as good as could be expected. Here in Pir-jo-Goth, watched over with the kindly help

of the divine Hashim, they were naturally good.

"This is indeed a blessed spot" nodded the Khan, and quoted the couplet that was inscribed above the Peacock throne in Imperial Delhi:

"Agar firdaus bar ru i zamin ast
Hamin ast o hamin ast o hamin ast."
If there be a paradise on earth
It is this, it is this, it is this.

The Pir bowed, smiling at the felicitous quotation, adding a verse from the Quran. "Verily the places of worship are set apart."

There was a pause.

"Are not the wrestlers ready?" the Pir at last demanded. They were not. Mubarak, the town's champion, was not at the moment to be found. No one minded. The string-band struck up again, people talked, craned their necks to see the two august figures on the carpet, laid bets on Mubarak's chances of an easy win. Presently the chief Khalifa suggested they should have some story-telling to fill in the time. A good suggestion! And people applauded when the Khalifa himself squatted down facing the Pir and, putting his head in his hands, thought for a moment.

Then he began:

"One morning as Hashim Shah was grazing his cow in the fields an old couple came past, hand-in-hand, laughing. That same evening the couple returned, weeping."

A stir of interest went over those in the crowd who were near enough to hear. The story was starting well.

"Hashim said to them: 'When you went by this morning you were laughing, but now you weep. What is your trouble?' The old man said, 'My wife and I have been married for forty years, but we have never been blest with children. This morning a neighbour told us to go to the Magician of Hala and he would grant our request and bless us with a son. So we set forth happily. But when we came to the palace of the Magician, he, in answer to our prayer, fell into a trance. On awakening he said: "I have looked into the Book of Fate but in it no son is ordained for you; such is the decree of all-seeing Allah."'

"Hashim felt pity for them and gazed earnestly at the woman for a moment. Then he turned to the man and said, 'Quick, take your wife home upon a swift camel lest she give birth on the way.' But the couple looked scornfully at the ragged beggar and jeered at him. As they did so, the woman suddenly felt her birth-

pangs and before they could reach home a son was born."

"Ah!" cried the people. "That was a fine miracle of Hashim Shah's. And then?" They craned forward.

The Khalifa smiled round at them.

"As you may imagine, the news of this extraordinary event filled the neighbourhood. But when the Magician of Hala heard of it he was convulsed with rage. 'Who is this charlatan,' he demanded, 'who tries to seduce my subjects with his tricks?' At length he decided to go in person and quell the upstart. He called for his magic boat which sailed the Indus without oars or sails. He sat erect in the stern and his disciples lay prostrate at his feet, very fearful because of their master's anger. So great was the Magician's rage that the water under the boat began to boil and the whole Indus smoked from Himalaya to the sea. Hashim was sitting meditating on the river-bank when he saw the water at his feet suddenly seethe and steam. He immediately understood that this portent signified the furious approach of the Magician."

The Khalifa paused dramatically, stretching out one arm as though indeed the Magician were approaching. A few men looked nervously over their shoulders. The others waited

impatiently. "Go on, Khalifa Saheb, what happened then?"

"What was Hashim Shah to do?" cried the Khalifa. "An ordinary man would be terrified at that moment."

"They would indeed" everyone agreed.

"Well, Hashim Shah was no ordinary man. Putting his foot into the river, he extended it for some miles under water and with his toes gripped the keel of the Magician's boat. For the first time the Magician's boat refused to move for all the commands of its master. It remained motionless in mid-stream, while the great river swept past on either side. The Magician looked over into the water but all he could see was a long leg stretching away out of sight. 'Bring me an axe,' he roared, 'that I may cut in pieces this absurd leg.' But when he lifted the axe to strike, the foot disappeared, and in its place two huge golden horns rose up in front of the prow barring the boat's further progress. Then the Magician began to tremble. He realised that some superhuman power was matched against him. He lifted up his voice and cried, 'O sorcerer, whoever and wherever you may be, you that strike against me, come hither, that we may talk.' So Hashim came across the water and sat in the boat. Then the

Magician asked, 'How did you perform that miracle, granting a child to the barren woman? It was decreed in her fate that she should not conceive, and who can alter that?' "

"Indeed he might well ask that," the listeners said to each other. "It was no wonder he was astonished."

"No wonder," agreed the Khalifa. "But that was because he didn't know Hashim Shah. Hashim told him 'My cousin, the Princess of Multan, granddaughter of the Emperor, recently had an intrigue with a handsome young cavalier. Love outran discretion and a child was about to be born. The Princess appeared to me in a dream and besought me to prevent its birth for if the intrigue were revealed she would be put to death for unchastity. I was first puzzled, for I could not make away with the unborn child without committing the sin of murder. As I pondered, that old couple returned from Hala weeping, and told me the reason for their distress. Then I saw the solution and I transferred the unborn child from the womb of the Princess into that of the peasant woman. Thus also I granted the old woman's request without changing the decrees of her fate, for it was not she who conceived. So it was not, O Magician, a very remarkable miracle.'

"When he heard that the Magician was overwhelmed with envy and despair. He leapt out of the boat and was cooked to a turn by the water which his rage had caused to boil."

The Khan applauded almost louder than anyone. "A delightful story" he said to the Pir. It reminded him of the stories his mother used to tell him in the little room over their carpet-shop in Quetta bazar. His hard little lizard's face was relaxed in reminiscent tenderness. A pity we haven't any story-teller half so fine in Mekran. My mother leaning over my little pallet on smoky autumn evenings, telling me the old stories of the saints and heroes of the Border, and down in the shop below my father bargaining endlessly—you could distinguish the whining voices of Shikarpuris and the deep-throated courtesies of men from Kandahar—as the hookahs puffed and bubbled, their silver chains rattling; and then the tinkle of coffee-cups served to every visitor.

He sighed, and taking a topaz-ring from his finger tossed it to the Khalifa who salaamed gratefully.

Meanwhile the wrestler Mubarak had arrived, during the Khalifa's story-telling, and had squatted down not far from the Pir. He was a colossal negro, descendant of one of the slaves

imported from Abyssinia for the Emirs' households. He was a man of enormous strength and violent temper. He had once killed a Hindu policeman in a fit of religious excitement but had escaped conviction for lack of evidence. When in a good mood he was playful as a child and had a great reputation as a buffoon, of which he was inordinately proud. He was wearing a turban of shell-pink silk and baggy pink silk trousers, and on his feet English gym-shoes tied with laces of pink silk. His oily black chest was bare. He wore suspended on a chain a Quran encased in heavy silver.

Seeing him the Pir nodded to him to begin. He stood up and shouted and a dozen wrestlers came out into the arena. They were mostly negroes. They strode about the ring in brilliant-hued turbans, their bulging muscles sleek with oil. They walked to and fro boasting at the top of their voices.

Several wrestling bouts took place at the same time. Mubarak was matched with a young boy, a novice. He looked at him scornfully and began to taunt him. Then he called his seconds who pulled up his wide trousers and tucked them in a bunch round his hips. When he was ready he began to slap his biceps and shout as loudly as he could to unnerve his opponent.

They grappled with each other and Mubarak lifted the boy clear off the ground and fell upon him, knocking all the wind out of his body. He got up grinning and dusted himself. Then he began to dance slowly round the ring, describing in a ringing chant the ardours of his struggle, the enormous strength of his opponent and his own superior endurance and courage. When he reached the place where the Pir was sitting he pretended to be overcome by religious awe. He leapt into the air and bounded and pranced, yelling in ecstasy. Then he fell on the ground and rolled over and over babbling praises and blessings. The Pir called out to him. Mubarak jumped to his feet and ran forward and kissed the ground in front of the Pir. The Pir turned to his Khalifa and said: "Give this man money. He has wrestled well." Mubarak caught the coins the Khalifa flung to him and returned to the ring well pleased with himself.

His next opponent was a giant Brahui from across the border, very gorgeous in a pale apricot turban and apricot-coloured trousers. He was very quiet and purposeful and not in the least disconcerted by Mubarak's shouts and threats. When Mubarak sprang forward he caught him by the arms. Mubarak lunged forward with his head, but the Brahui stepped

back. Then they clinched, gripping each other like bears, swaying this way and that, each trying to trip the other up.

"Ha" gasped Mubarak, "I shall soon finish you off."

"Oh no," murmured the Brahui quite confidently, "I am much stronger than you."

Mubarak suddenly felt that this was true and became discouraged. The Brahui gave a quicker push and twined his leg round Mubarak's right calf. He put out his full strength and lunged forward, and Mubarak fell like a log. The Brahui remained standing. He glanced down contemptuously at the negro and spat. Then he looked about him in a quiet business-like way for his next opponent.

Mubarak lay for a long time dazed and ashamed. At last he got up, dusted himself, tied a clean turban on his head and began to dance round the ring shouting. But he was half-hearted in his boasts for he knew that people were laughing at him for having been so easily beaten by a stranger. They didn't feel in the least sorry for him, although he was the local champion and petted by the Pir, for he was a bully; and now everyone, when he passed boasting, tittered provokingly. Only the Pir felt sorry for him; such a good devoted fellow, very

pious and obedient. Mubarak's seconds massaged his arms with oil and consoled him by saying that the Brahui had not wrestled fair but had won by some low trick, perhaps by magic.

"I don't think by magic" Mubarak muttered ruefully. "Not as long as I'm wearing this Quran which has been blessed by Pir Saheb himself."

The wrestling went on.

Kitti who had been watching on the outskirts of the crowd became bored and turned to go. Suddenly she heard behind her a stir, and looked back. The Khan was standing, a telegram in his hand. She saw him still and rigid, staring as though mesmerised at the little brown strip of paper. Then his hand fell and the paper fluttered to the ground. It had been from his secretary: "Come immediately. His Highness passed away." Miles to the southwest things were happening, the future was being forged in that long low fortress-palace with its window-slits and crenellated sand-bagged roof. But *what* was happening? The Khan stared about him. That he should have been absent just now. He had so many enemies. . . . He turned and ran towards his camel. The crowd stood silent. It was a moment full of

doom. The Khan's camel passed quite close to Kitti. His face was set and strained, the cheek-bones jutting, the mouth a colourless thin line. He did not look down and never noticed the girl whose dancing had pleased him so much the night before.



"Send me Zaka" said Pir Zaman Shah, and the young Loor came carrying his one-stringed lute. It was Thursday evening and according to the custom the Loors went to sing *kafis* or religious ballads all night long in the inner shrine; all who could find room were admitted, and in the gloom the veiled Loors could chant the *kafis*, swaying with ecstasy, till one by one they succumbed and fell back fainting.

"I feel tired" the Pir said. "It has been a strain, the visit of that estimable Khan." He was sitting cross-legged on a low lacquered cot, and he motioned to the Loor to squat at his feet.

There was a long silence, the Pir sitting motionless, his dim old eyes vaguely blinking, and the Loor squatted facing him, watching him narrowly over the black folds of his veil.

At last the Pir, as though speaking to himself, murmured, "A pretty girl that—what did she call herself?—Kitti, oh yes. A fine girl. Ah,

if I were younger and not a Pir. . . . Just the sort of wife a man would like to have. . . .”

A quick tremor passed over the Loor's face. His steady stare was now full of contempt. The old fool in his dotage. . . .

“Shall I sing you a *kafi*, Shahin Shah?”

“Yes, do Zaka.”

And Zaka sang, on purpose, one of the secret *kafis* which were not written in any book but handed down by the Initiates and known only to the inner circle of the Pir's entourage, for they were concerned with the doctrines which were not known to the outer world. Laymen understood that when Hashim Shah's bride, the Princess Saada, died—a tragic death for it was only three years after her romantic rescue from the well wherein her father had imprisoned her with a huge rock over the mouth—then Hashim's grief was so great that he abandoned the world and became the famous saint we know. But only to the Illuminati was it disclosed that Hashim wandered fruitlessly over the earth seeking consolation in vain till at length he was visited by a young male angel in whose embrace he became acquainted with all knowledge and freed from all desire. Ever since, the descendants of Hashim have been officially celibate. Scandals and lapses there

had been, but never any open break with the tradition. Each Pir chose his successor from among the band of Initiates and in sacramental union conferred on him the knowledge and spiritual authority that had been bestowed by the angel on Hashim. Thenceforth the Pir was to have no other mate. But, Zaka sniffed, his present holiness seemed quite to have forgotten the traditions of his office. First Abdulla, a common dancing-boy, and now this drivel about a wife and the circus woman. . . .

Slowly Zaka sang the *kafi* that told of Hashim's meeting with the angel. His voice, low and tremulous, lingered over each word and died away in sobbing melancholy. When he had finished he excused himself abruptly and went out and sat on the baked-mud wall of the outer courtyard.

Down there below, outside the city were the smoky lights of the circus. That accursed woman. . . .

"If that ever comes to pass," he said to himself, "then my life has been wasted," and he fell to thinking of his childhood in Rawalpindi, where his father was a prosperous merchant who hired furniture for the bungalows of English officers, obliged needy subalterns with loans and was a respected member of the Can-

tonment Board. He had never been able to understand his wayward passionate son, who took no interest in the family business but even as a child had pestered the priests for religious instruction and could be heard crying and praying aloud all night. Not that the old man was irreligious; but he was a typical urban Muhammadan, conventional and mentally pedestrian. He paid his dues to his priest and attended scrupulously the great festivals, buying new clothes for all his family and apprentices and servants at Id, and praying louder than anyone at the Idgah Wall outside the city; and of an evening he liked to sit in shirt-sleeves on the steps of his shop and exchange moral platitudes with his friends and quote from the Quran, and comment to them, as he stroked his stomach contentedly, how true it was that God protected the righteous. It was a terrible disappointment to him that his only son should be so queer.

"Make him a priest," his friends suggested, as they doubtfully eyed the thin sallow child with sunken cheeks and fever-bright eyes.

"Ah, I had so hoped he would carry on the business. I am getting feeble now. It would be nice to watch my son taking my place while I could rest in my old age. My only man-child, too."

"Send him at least to the Kazi Saheb for religious instruction."

"Yes, perhaps that would be best. He may tire of the labour in time. Kazi Saheb will not tolerate any odd fancies."

And so every morning the boy went off to the house of the Kazi¹ for religious instruction. At first he had been ecstatically grateful to his father, and had gazed upon the Kazi with dog-like devotion.

"Well, well," the Kazi murmured stroking his red-dyed beard, "what does our young scholar wish to learn about? You will learn a chapter of the Quran every day by heart will you? And I'll explain the verses to you one by one." And then he was interrupted by a couple who came to seek his mediation in some quarrel over a woman.

"She was promised to me in marriage Kazi Saheb, and now he's giving her to Ilm-Din."

"But there was no proper agreement, Kazi Saheb. Only a friendly chat over our coffee one evening."

"An agreement, even if implied, is binding; isn't it Kazi Saheb?"

"Yes, yes. . . . Let's see. We will look in Al

¹ Muhammadan Judge.

Haj Chirag-ud-din's Commentaries. There is an interesting passage on just this point."

And down would come some tattered old volume bound in green silk; and licking his fingers the Kazi would slowly turn the great pages, following the lines of spidery Arabic with gnarled forefinger, murmuring to himself. "Somewhere here, I'm sure it is. I was reading it only the other day. Tch, tch, where can it be?" The spectacles were pushed up onto the forehead and he sat blinking, the pale eyes staring vacantly at the wall. "Ah, I know. The passage comes in the last volume—there at the end of the shelf. Reach it down Zaka, will you?"

Zaka soon realised that the Kazi had little interest in his pupil. He was a dreary old man who had been in Government service, married four times, been twice to Mecca, drank a little on the sly, and painted his raddled old face of which he was inordinately proud, imagining from the competitive advances of his wives that he was unusually attractive to women. On his father's death he had succeeded him as Kazi. He enjoyed the dignity of the position and was full of sententious quotations from the better known Persian poets or the "Sayings" of Muhammad. But he knew little or nothing of any real theology and when his pupil bothered him

to explain the doctrine of the Undying Imam, and whether it was true that Muhammad, as he had heard an itinerant Sufi say at a street corner, had never existed in the flesh, only his phantasm, then the Kazi grew irritated and said to himself how much better it would have been if old Yusuf had given his precocious brat a good thrashing instead of sending him to vex the life out of a busy and god-fearing man; a judge in Israel. What would his flock think if they heard the child airing these odd ideas in so respectable and responsible a house? And Zaka soon understood that the Kazi, whom he had at first revered as a fountain-head of wisdom, was in reality dismally ignorant. He began to hate the musty smell of the Kazi's room, the smell of dust and bugs and rotting leather, he gave up all attempts to learn the Quran by heart or to understand its meaning. He sat back on his heels against the wall, the Book open before him, his eyes fixed on infinity; and the Kazi, glad of his troublesome pupil's new quietness, was kind to him and patted him on the shoulder as he left.

"Must have learnt most of the Book by heart now, eh? That's the way. Learn and understand the Quran and that's all the knowledge you'll ever need."

Zaka nodded sighing. Just out of reach of his mental vision flickered faint hints of ecstatic revelation and unearthly bliss. And to his father's half-jocular enquiries he answered seriously. "Yes, we are progressing very well, thank you. It is a great privilege to have someone so learned as the Kazi Saheb to help me in my studies." So his father chuckled and shook his head. "Eh! Eh! He'll be a great scholar one day that boy of mine. Ah well, I suppose we can't all be keen on business."

But it was soon after this that Zaka's fits began. He would fall to the ground and lie there rigid, a thin line of foam flecking his lips, and when they revived him he would babble of visions, of the Archangel Gabriel who had spoken to him and of the Prophet Jesus with whom he rode in a dragon-prowed boat over a sea of milk. The doctors were concerned, prescribed herbs to be rubbed over his body and religious texts to be hung on his forehead and breast; but when he gradually recovered they did not divulge whether it was to the herbs or to the texts that they attributed his cure. Recover he did, but never regained his old vivacity. He seemed to be sunk in a dull lethargy, very gentle and submissive, and no longer bothering people with hard questions. And then,

just as his father was congratulating himself on the boy's new docility and hoping that he might be converted to an interest in the family shop after all, Zaka ran away without leaving any message and was not seen again in Rawalpindi. Even now Zaka found it difficult to remember the details of the succeeding days. He reached Multan, where he halted awhile because that city had been the home of the poet-saint Shams-i-Tabriz, who by his spells drew the sun down out of heaven to burn up his enemies. Like a ghost revisiting the scenes of its earthly pilgrimage he wandered about the bazar seeking for some trace of that holy singer, murmuring his verses, and staggering like a drunkard. Then he heard two camel-men talking of a Sufi teacher who lived some miles from the town and had performed innumerable miracles. He interrupted them, asking to be told the whereabouts of that Sufi, and having learnt them he went there and flung himself at the Sufi's feet and begged to be accepted as a disciple. But he learnt as little from the Sufi as from the Kazi, for the man was a charlatan who sold texts that he had blessed for fabulous sums to the needy and would spend a whole morning haggling over the price of his "cures." His only trace of Sufism was a smattering of com-

monplace theosophy, a few stock phrases about all religions being the same and the only God' being each man's Higher Self. So Zaka soon left him and drifted down towards the Baluchi border, earning his supper as a day-labourer wherever he found a farmer in need of an extra hand. At length he had come to a village where the landowner belonged to the sect of the Hashimites, and there for the first time Zaka heard of the cult of Hashim Shah. He was sitting at evening with the other labourers in the landowner's courtyard, and a singer sang one of the ballads of Hashim. The name was unfamiliar and Zaka enquired about him. Even a bare outline of the saint's story filled him with a strange excitement. Night after night he returned to the landowner's courtyard and sat humbly in the shadows, always hoping for another song about Hashim Shah and, whenever his hope was realised, weeping with ecstasy. To think that Hashim's descendant was even now alive, a Pir enthroned! Of course, Zaka had heard of many Pirs before. North India is full of them, each claiming descent from some or other hero of Islam. But in the conventional world of the towns they are not spoken of with respect. Their devotees are the tribes of the hills and clansmen of the waste lands. But

this Pir was the descendant of his new-found hero, Hashim Shah; and the more Zaka learnt of the precepts of his cult the more convinced he became that he had at last found the faith he had been seeking. All day as he bent over his work in the fields he prayed that he might somehow gain entry to the service of the Pir and find favour in his sight. Both prayers were granted. The Pir visited that village on his *gusht*, the annual tour when he collected the tribute of the faithful. And the village turned out to greet him. The camels and bullocks (the village's treasure) were paraded before him in case his holiness should take a fancy to any of them. Bracelets were torn off hands and rings from fingers and cast before him. And then the Pir noticed the beseeching adoring face of Zaka, his beauty and appealing grace unspoilt by the rags he wore.

"What's your name, lad?"

"Shah Saheb!" he touched the holy man's feet. "My name is Zaka Ullah."

The Pir nodded to his Khalifa. "I shall need him."

As one of the Pir's servants Zaka was for a while blissfully happy. His eager intelligence and devotion were soon repaid by the Pir's increasing favour. "A clever lad, intelligent far

beyond his years and very enthusiastic for the faith. He can sing too, and has an excellent memory." And presently the Pir ordered him to be instructed in the secret doctrines of the Illuminati. So after the Templar-like initiation ceremony Zaka donned the black veil and was enrolled among the Roshaniyyeh, and in no long time became the leader of them, the expected Heir. Even the Khalifas (who were always the Roshaniyyeh of the former Pir, and who on his death shed their veils and assumed the status of elder brothers to the new *sijdeh-nishin*) were respectful to him. Respectful, but presently a little nervous of him, he was so zealous an ascetic, so savagely attached to every article of ancient tradition. He said openly to them that the followers of Hashim had in many things fallen away from the precepts of their Founder and that he would one day restore the full severity of the former rule. They whispered to the Pir that, admirable though no doubt was the young man's fervour, might not his holiness restrain some of these wilder ambitions? The Pir nodded, and hinted to Zaka to put a curb on his natural impetuosity.

Zaka folded his arms and stared at his master, "But, Shah Saheb, do they allege I have

said anything but what was ordained by the divine Hashim?"

"No, no," grumbled the Pir, "but you must be gentle with the Khalifas, not startle them with too reckless proposals. They are old now, many of them. . . ."

Zaka shrugged his shoulders. The Kazi, the Sufi and now the Pir. But his fervour for the cult of Hashim continued undiminished. The Pir might be an unworthy servant, and many of the sacred regulations of the Founder might be disregarded, but one day he, Zaka, would change all that and restore the faith to its early purity. For he was the leader of the elect, the Roshaniyyeh, who always succeeded the Pir. Always? That is, had always done so. And now the Pir was talking of marriage. . . .

It was not the first occasion the old man had shown signs of eccentricity. There had been that time when he insisted that every one of the hairs of his beard repeated "Allah! Allah! Allah!" in a voice as sweet as the pealing of bells. Did they not hear it? And the sycophants bent down their heads to listen and swore that they, too, heard that. Hating himself for his cowardice, Zaka had agreed.

And then there had been the affair of the pigs. The Pir had had some dispute with the

English Deputy Commissioner over the number of rifles his exalted office entitled him to. The Deputy Commissioner had won by the simple threat of forbidding the Pir to have any rifles at all and for a season the Pir had been frenziedly anti-English. He had bought some pigs and labelled one Viceroy, the other Governor of the Punjab and the third Deputy Commissioner; and the wretched beasts would be solemnly brought out every day before the Pir's judgment-seat and flogged while the Pir sat exulting. "Ha, Viceroy! You squeal do you? That'll teach you to be impertinent to me. Lay on harder. Take the skin off his back. And you, Governor, your fore-legs are both broken now aren't they? How do you like that? Painful, eh? A good lesson to you my lad. . . ." Amusing for the first day Zaka agreed, but it had gone on interminably, new pigs taking the places of those who succumbed. . . .

Ah, what a tragedy, the future of Hashim's sublime creed in the hands of an old dotard. Zaka, sitting on the wall of the Pir's palace and gazing over the murky gleam of the circus, cursed bitterly under his breath.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“GOOD-BYE, Madam Saheba.” Kitti took Mrs. Ironside’s frail little hand in hers. “May God bless you for your kindness to me. I shall never forget it.”

“That’s a good girl.” Mrs. Ironside’s eyes filled with tears. “I must say I wish you were coming with us.”

“I shall be missing the circus so much,” Kitti said.

“Yes, and I’m sure we’ll all miss you.” She turned round again to watch the men loading the camels. “Oh dear, I do hope we’ve packed everything. What a scrimmage it was packing, wasn’t it?” It had been indeed; Vera had had hysterics and one of Mary-John’s black pyjamas couldn’t be found and the Captain dropped his pipe out of the window and then broke a window-pane in his rage. “But it’s always like that when we pack up after a long stay in one place. You get settled like, and then it’s a business digging up your roots again if you know what I mean.” She pushed back her *topi* and mopped her forehead with a little lace handkerchief. “And I never had time to

do my hair; I must look a fright. Oh well, I don't suppose we shall be meeting many people on the way." She turned and gazed at the wastes of rolling sand that stretched from the thin strip of cultivation along the river-bank right to the far horizon, the monotony of grey dunes broken by an occasional thorn-bush.

"The circus tents are all finished off, thank goodness," she sighed with relief as a string of camels swung slowly past laden with rolls of canvas and iron-shod poles. "Well, I suppose we ought to be starting now."

The other members of the troupe shook hands with Kitti, Vera in a sudden spasm of sentimental remorse kissing her and crying, and Mary-John whispering, "Ay shall always remember those lovely ruderies you told me. They've been most useful in coping with the forwards."

Captain Ironside patted Kitti several times on the shoulder. "It'll be a long time before we get another hula-dancer half as good. Yes my girl, you were a credit to us." Then he mounted his camel with a great stir.

"Well, it really is good-bye isn't it!" Mrs. Ironside's voice was tremulous. "Ah dear, it's a pity, I can't help thinking, that you decided to stay on here alone. Of course this Peer or

whatever he calls himself may be very kind but there's no good disguising the fact that you'll be living with him without being married. Still, perhaps he'll marry you after all. Good-bye dear, and take care of yourself."

She gave Kitti two quick little kisses, patted her hand and then bustled off to her camel.

How tiny and frail she looked perched on the camel, clinging on nervously to the camel-driver. Kitti felt a lump rise in her throat, and when all the members of the troupe turned one after the other to wave to her she waved her hand wildly, almost despairingly, and then turned back towards the city feeling a sudden loneliness.

There was a camel-palanquin with silk curtains awaiting her.



Zaka's lantern glimmered faintly over the rough walls, his heavy Pathan sandals clacked over the worn stairway. He stepped gingerly for fear of black scorpions and vipers, and ducked his head when a sudden bat swooped from the tangle of mosses overhead. He gave a sigh of relief when he came out on a low platform open to the sky, jutting out from the palace walls. A negro guard moved out of the

shadows and the moonlight gleamed along his huge flat-bladed spear.

"It is I, Zaka Ullah."

"Allah salamat rakhe."

"Pir Saheb has sent me to tell you to summon Mubarak. He has gone down to the old cemetery with the other negroes."

The negro hesitated. "We have been warned never to leave this post when on duty. You remember Ibrahim, who went off for an hour after some girl, and how Pir Saheb had him nailed up in a box? I do not dare leave."

"Don't be a fool. I bring you a message from the Pir himself. You know who I am. Give me your spear. I will keep guard while you are away."

"Zaka Saheb, if anything happens . . ."

"Nothing will happen."

At last the negro agreed and gave Zaka his spear. When his footsteps on the stone stairway had died away, Zaka raised his lantern to a barred window in the wall. There was a small stir within. Zaka stood on tiptoe and called softly, "Inayet Shah!"

A faint cough answered him and then a quavering voice: "Who is it?"

"A friend, Inayet Shah. Come to the window."

"I don't want anything. Leave me in peace. Let me die."

"Inayet Shah, but one word I beseech you."

There was a slow and dragging shuffle. In earlier days when this prisoner had been obstreperous the Pir had let his hunting-dogs into the cell. The walls were covered with hooks, and as the prisoner ran round despairing the hooks tore his flesh, and when the dogs pulled him down (but they were dragged off before they could seriously harm him—it was but a punishment for the abusive insults he used to hurl at the Pir at the top of his voice) his ankle had been broken. Suddenly the prisoner's face came into the circle of light, a drawn white face, blank and lifeless, with sunken eyes and untended hair.

"What is it?" he mumbled, and Zaka noticed that his teeth had fallen out. His lips, too, were shrunken and chapped. Zaka felt a sudden spasm of terror at the workings of Fate. Here was this poor wretch slowly decomposing in a dungeon while his brother reigned as Pir. Such had been their respective fates decreed at birth and nothing could alter them. But this man had been a fool—that futile attempt to supplant his brother. He had paid dearly for

it. First led in procession round the town tied upon the back of an ass, his face smeared with dung, and then this unending imprisonment.

"Would you like to be free?" Zaka whispered.

"I don't understand," the prisoner whimpered. "Why do you come to trouble me? I am dying. I want nothing." The eyes rolled in the lean shrivelled head, eyes without intelligence or hope.

Zaka sighed, and lowered the lantern. The prisoner flopped heavily on the floor of his cell and lay softly moaning, a terrible eerie sound that made Zaka shudder.



The negro guardsman hurried towards the old cemetery. It was here that the negroes met every evening, a custom observed since the time when their ancestors had been exported from Abyssinia. Among the crumbling mausolea and broken tombs they played like children, danced, clowned and told stories.

The people of the town watched them, laughing at their antics, at their ridiculous faces; and the negroes laughed back happily and cut even more extravagant capers, wagging their heads,

rolling their eyes and making absurd popping noises under their armpits. Mubarak was the best clown among them and the Pir often sent for him at night when he could not sleep, for Mubarak was a good story-teller.

To-night the negroes were sitting round in a circle while Mubarak told stories of Mangho Pir, whose shrine near Karachi has a pool with sacred crocodiles which in the old days were fed with living victims. One crocodile is called the Mor Waghu or Peacock among Crocodiles and is of immense antiquity, and is said to be the *daimon* of Mangho Pir watching the conduct of his devotees from the shadow of the great tree under which he crouches. But what of the other crocodiles? Mubarak was telling them the story of their origin.

This was the sort of tale the negroes enjoyed, simple and easy to understand, and they were all laughing uproariously when the negro guardsman came hurrying up and tapped Mubarak on the shoulder to tell him the Pir wanted him.

“Ya Allah,” Mubarak grumbled. “What, at this time of the night?”

“Yes, yes. He sent a very urgent message.”

“You might have said I was ill, had gone out to some village or something.” And all the way

to the palace Mubarak complained. Nor was he at all appeased when Zaka met them and told them that the Pir Saheb no longer required Mubarak. His holiness had fallen asleep and should not be disturbed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IN the steely light of early dawn Kitti lay curled like a little snake beside the Pir. She had pushed off the quilts and blankets with which the couch was piled and lay naked, her hair about her shoulders. It was a hot airless morning, still and silent save for the droning of mosquitoes. But the Pir never seemed to mind the heat. He loved the tattered silk quilts that were strewn over his great body. How heavily he breathed, a whistling intake, a stertorous asthmatic release of breath. As the light grew Kitti could see his face. He looked pathetically old and decrepit, the wrinkles deeply shadowed and the kohl round his eyes dry and caked. At the roots of his beard you could catch a line of grey between the dye and the hair freshly sprouted. And his skin was bloodless and sapless like a leather mask. He lay there in the dawn-light like a Dagon toppled from his pedestal.

Dispassionately Kitti regarded him. She had hardly realised he was so old. How much longer could he live? And after him? Of course if there were a man-child things would be different. . . .

Yielding to a sudden impulse she pressed herself against him and he moved. His hands groped over the coverlet and his wrinkled eyelids opened. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment with the blank and wondering gaze of a child. Then he felt Kitti warm and living beside him, and his old tired body crept with a sudden stir of life. He turned over heavily, the knotted strings of the couch creaking under his weight, and he put his arm round Kitti and drew her tight to him. It was ecstasy to feel her firm soft body, the rise and fall of her tight small breasts, the throb of her young life pulsing against him. He began to stroke her clumsily, but she shivered suddenly at the touch of his dry cold hand.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Nothing, my lord" and she pressed closer still.

"Is there anything you want, dear little one?"

"Yes," she said very low, and leaning over him she whispered in his ear. "A proper *nikah*.¹ I am a poor helpless child and when my lord is gone who will take care of me? But after the *nikah* at least I shall be respected and not utterly destitute."

He nodded. "Later, later, heart of my

¹ Marriage ceremony.

heart," and he began to kiss her, whispering endearments, "Meri Jan. Mera dil."

She did not bother him any more about the *nikah* then; she had at least mentioned it and not been refused; and she showed proper gratitude when the Pir told her that he had ordered some jewels for her. "I have told Hotu the *bania* to bring them this morning. My little moon-bird will be happy then, won't she?"

Kitti nodded ecstatically. She had never had any jewels of her own. She remembered how she had envied Bali's, and wondered if she would ever have so fine a necklace or so lovely a pair of anklets.

The *bania* repeated his visit. Presently he was coming regularly to the palace with a tray of ornaments. . . .

". . . That will do," Kitti said. "I choose these. Tell Pir Saheb's *khazanchi* to pay the *bania*. You may go."

The maidservant gathered the remaining jewels and laid them carefully up in silk coverings. Kitti sat playing with the necklaces she had chosen, letting the glittering rivulets of emerald, opal and pearl flow between her fingers. She clasped about her wrist a gold slave-bangle, hung with silver chains, each terminating in a cluster of sombre-gleaming

garnets. For her feet she had chosen heavy silver anklets with a fringe of silver tassels that flowed down from the ankle to the ground, covering her feet and jingling when she moved.

Kitti feasted her eyes on the shimmering coloured stones. She rubbed the soft pearls against her cheeks and down her throat. She held the necklaces out at arm's length, twisting them about her wrist or holding them entwined like a cat's cradle of string. "Lovely, lovely things" she whispered, watching the sunlight waken to life the witch-fires of the emeralds and the bronze lamps that glowed in the milky haze of the opals. Now at least she knew what jewels were. Even Bali's ornaments seemed crude by comparison. She let the bracelets fall in a tinkling, sparkling heap in her lap and stretched her arms above her head in feline contentment. A slow smile parted her full red lips. God had surely been good to her. Looking from the latticed window out over the town, the Pir-jo-Goth, that tumbled away in waves of clustering roofs and tapering minarets from the walls of the palace courtyard down to the banks of the river, she knew that all those houses and all those crowds thronging the narrow winding streets were hers, were in her power, that a

whisper could decide their fate, that her smile could raise and her frown abase. She felt strong, filled with animal power.

. . . Often the Pir came in to her rooms, looking heavy and sullen, but as soon as his eyes lighted on her his expression softened and he smiled and opened his arms to her. She almost loved him for his doting weakness with her. . . .

She rested her chin on her elbow and leant against the window-sill. It was a cool morning and a soft mist powdered the red roofs below. Green pigeons wheeled slowly in a cloudless sky. The river was a wall of vivid blue encircling the town; fishing-boats with triangular red and yellow sails were anchored motionless and the plaintive lapwings hovered in the mid-heaven like painted butterflies. Along the banks of the river, fields of wheat rippled under an occasional breeze, fields of *jambho* were cauldrons of liquid gold. And after the belt of cultivation the grey dunes, and the frontier hills climbing steeply the pale sky.

There were voices in the courtyard. She craned out. Ah yes, the *bania*. She saw him shrinking before two negroes, sidling apologetically towards the gate. The negroes were chaffing him coarsely.

"Keep your wife ready for us, *bania*; I expect we'll be calling in on you one of these nights."

And the *bania* grinned obsequiously and bowed first to one and then the other, all the time sidling forward like a crab. They gave him a playful buffet that sent him stumbling towards the gate and guffawed boisterously. The next moment he was out in the street.

Kitti laughed too, but half pityingly. The poor little wretch. And he brought such lovely jewels for her. It was a shame to mock at him like that.

But her sympathy was wasted, as she would have realised had she seen the *bania* hugging himself with joy as soon as he reached his little shop. A great morning's work. A few more sales like that and he'd be able to leave Pirjo-Goth for good and all. He shut and bolted the door of his shop. He lived quite alone in the two rooms over his shop. One room was his bedroom and study and the other a chapel. He went to a tin box in one corner of his bedroom and took out his account-books, shapeless rolls of yellow parchment inscribed with a crabbed and secret calligraphy, and tied together with faded ribbon. He wetted his bent forefinger and turned over the stiff crackling sheets. The names of most of the leading

men in the town were written there, for at some time or another they had come to him for loans and in return mortgaged their lands to him. He smiled happily to himself, his little eyes twinkling. Ah, he had done well, not a doubt of it. But one had to be careful, oh very careful; the more successful the more careful. He was the only *bania* who had lived so long in Pir-jo-Goth. In the old prosperous days of the War there had been quite a flourishing colony. And then had come the '21 crash. Some of them had pressed their debtors, had talked of actions in the civil courts, and there had been a pogrom. The Hindus were locked in with their account-books piled round them and burnt alive. Then Hotu's predecessor, who had ventured into Pir-jo-Goth four years after that, had been very conceited and insolent, showing too openly his contempt for the savages he lived among. "A very foolish fellow," muttered Hotu, shaking his head. They had tied him on the back of a camel, hacked off his fingers and stuffed them into his mouth, and driven the camel out of the city to wander at its will over the desert. So there was another gap. And then Hotu's father had told him to go and try his luck. Hotu had sighed but not protested. He was a good Hindu and the

word of his father was law. But it was sad to leave Shikarpur and to say good-bye to his meek little brown *bania* wife whom he might never see again. He had hoped to have finished his journeyings. As a young man he had travelled for his father's firm in Turkestan, studying the ramifications of Hindu finance, learning how one of his father's scribbled *hundis* could be cashed anywhere in Iran or Eastern China. He had stayed for some months with his brother who ran a gramophone shop in Kashgar, and in Hamadan he had financed a firm for the manufacture of faked-antique carpets for the European market. Then he had returned to Shikarpur and had looked forward to a long rest and prosperous middle age, one of the leading citizens of the place, municipal councillor, perhaps one day member of the Legislative Council, travelling down grandly to Bombay and sitting on committees. But their firm was not doing so well nowadays, and his father had suggested he should start a new branch on the Baluch border, where there were no competitors. So Hotu had saddled his little grey donkey, packed in a clumsy bundle a couple of shirts, a couple of *dhotis* and some religious books, and set off alone for Pir-jo-Goth.

He had been cordially welcomed, for the improvident Muhammadans, as he chuckled to himself, couldn't do long without some sort of moneylender. Now, on paper, he was enormously wealthy—all in a few years. But one had to be so careful.

He closed his account-books with a little sigh of satisfaction. The Pir's new infatuation was a godsend. Hotu found him the jewels and then advanced him the cash to pay for them at huge rates of interest. His holiness felt himself too grand to argue with a wretched *bania*. "Write what you like, you little eunuch," he used to roar. "Do you think I'm going to bargain with you?"

"Shah Saheb is too good to me already, permitting me access to his inspiring presence," Hotu said glibly, rubbing his hands and bowing repeatedly, his yellow face a maze of tiny wrinkles.

So the Pir put his thumb-mark on the mortgage just where Hotu told him. And Hotu trotted home and locked the crackling square of parchment in the tiny box in his bedroom.

This morning a larger amount than usual had been signed for, and Hotu felt full of gratitude to God. He went into the chapel, which was

a square windowless room lit with a flickering oil-lamp. On the wall was a rough daub of a man on horseback rising from a river, that Hotu himself had painted carefully. He belonged to the sect of Daryapanthis and this was meant to be the river-god, Lal Udero.

On a little altar lay his religious books. Hotu squatted down and opened a book of poems and read how, to test the faith of his favourite disciple, Lal Udero told him to walk with him over the Indus. "Whither thou goest, I will go," said Phugar the beloved disciple; and hand-in-hand they trod the raging torrents, and to the people watching wonder-struck from the banks they seemed to be transfigured into two tall pillars of snow-white foam.

Hotu's reading was interrupted by a sudden knocking on the door of his shop. He started and sat for a moment with his mouth open, his pale eyes blinking in the dim lamplight of his chapel. On the wall before him the river-god rode majestically on his white horse, the waves curving back like dolphins in his path. "Lal Udero," whispered Hotu. "Oh, Lal Saheb, protect me." But there were no cries from the street, no murmur of bloodthirsty Muhammadians. After a while the knocking began again, but lower. Hotu closed his book, pressed it to

his forehead, tied it in saffron silk and laid it on the little altar against the wall. He went into his bedroom and peered out of the window. Outside he was surprised to see one of the Loors. How frightened he had been at first by their melancholy cry at dawn. It was like the howling of wolves, Muhammadan wolves, at scent of a lonely and rich infidel. "But, of course, he must be a messenger from the Pir. Pir Saheb must want some more money. Twice in one day? No, perhaps he wants to refer to something in this morning's mortgage. But he can't cancel it now; he's put his thumb impression on it." And so musing he bustled downstairs and with much bowing and scraping begged the illustrious Roshaniyyeh to enter his humble dwelling.

"Surely his holiness must have asked you to summon me to his gorgeous mansion? I am his slave. I am ready to leave at once, so anxious am I to serve his holiness in every possible way." But no, it seemed the Loor wanted a loan for himself. "Ah yes, it is the noble Zaka Ullah, isn't it? Well, this is a tremendous honour for my wretched abode." And quickly behind his little screwed-up eyes Hotu reckoned up the risks. The leader of the Loors, one day to be Pir himself. . . . Oh yes, one could gamble

a little on that. "If the noble gentleman would just sign a paper I will prepare for him? Good, good. . . . Might be rude enough to know for what purpose? A journey? . . ."

Zaka nodded slowly. "Yes, a long journey."

CHAPTER TWENTY

THEY went due south, keeping the barrier of the frontier hills, the bare blond cliffs of the Osman Range, on their right. On the ridges of the rolling dunes the sand was firm and hard, but on the slopes there were long drifts of wind-blown dust into which they sank up to their knees. They turned their steps whenever they saw thornbushes or a stray stunted babul-tree bent like a candle-flame in the wind, for wherever a bush had taken root the ground would be firmer and would give some foothold. When they came to stretches of empty treeless expanse they sighed, for it meant a heavy trudge in the yielding sand.

Under the strong white sunlight the sand was a dreary melancholy grey; and grey, too, were the burnt-up thornbushes and spiky babuls and cactus-shrubs. But in the distance gleamed sometimes a sheet of pale-green water. A mirage, as they knew, but the water seemed strangely real; and beyond it rose a line of queer lumpy shadows that one moment were squat Chaldean monuments and the next were the ridged waves of a thundercloud. As they ap-

proached, the green water faded to a milky opalescence, and portions of the plain seemed to be detached from the earth and to float like islands in the sky; then the earth's horizon rose like a slow wave and swallowed up the mirage, and in an instant the long level plain stretched away in a dreary monochrome, as far as eye could see.

At last, after hours of marching, they saw in the distance a line of camels.

"Good" said Zaka's companion, "we are coming to the camel route to the North."

Soon they met and greeted the camel-men. They were Baluchis of the northern clans, dressed entirely in white, wearing enormous shapeless turbans, their hair falling loose over their chests in long oily ringlets. They had heavy brutal faces, dark and lined, and huge shoulders rounded like the shoulders of apes. Each carried some weapon in his roughly wound sash. They were taciturn and grim, men of the hills; away from their native heights they glanced about them uneasily in the wide emptiness of the plain, and moved warily like wolves.

They asked the two Loors whither they were bound.

"The Brahui country," Zaka's companion answered.

"That is a long journey, brothers."

"Yes, but my father is a Sardar among the Brahuis, and we go to visit him."

The tribesmen nodded. One asked sceptically why a Sardar's son should become one of the Loors.

"Religion takes one all unawares," said the boy.

"How true that is," and one of the Baluchis quoted a verse about God entering one's heart like a thief into a dark house.

"We had a bad year in our country and my father sent me and my brother out to earn some money. I enlisted in the army and was posted in Karachi. One night I heard someone tell of Hashim Shah and I abandoned my regiment to serve the descendant of that saint."

They exchanged mutual blessings with the tribesmen and went on their way.

"You are certain that your father will give us the men?" Zaka asked.

"Of course; why do you doubt that all of a sudden? I was his elder and favourite son. Had I not left the world I should be his heir. He will give me all the men I want."

They walked on for some time in silence and then the boy said, "Sometimes I feel afraid at the thought that we may be doing wrong."

After all the Pir Saheb is the direct descendant of our divine Hashim——”

“Pir Saheb is not himself any longer. His reason is enslaved by that witch. I have argued with him for hours and I know that his spirit is obscured from the light, and therefore his authority is in eclipse.”

“But we shan’t harm any one shall we? We’ll expel his evil advisers and restore the primitive simplicity of our cult?”

Zaka nodded. Those had been his first plans. Sometimes he had wondered how he would control the fury of the tribesmen when once their martial ardour was awake. And then the answer to that problem had come. Hashim Shah had appeared to him in a dream and handed him a sword and a green robe. “Enter upon a holy war my son,” the saint said. “Smite and spare not. The world has grown old and very evil. Blessed be the instruments of its destruction.” Zaka did not tell his companion of that dream but walked on beside him, his eyes above his veil blazing with insane glee.

On the fourth day they came out of the flat sandy plains to Kohistan, with its pebbly hills strewn with yellow boulders as though Jinns had been at play. In stony hollows were little

hamlets of Khosa Baluchis: straw-roofed huts, surrounded with walls of unknown stones. They would break their march at one of these villages for a pot of milk and a *bajri* loaf. The men would cluster round them for news. Zaka would reply vaguely "Good news" which meant "No news." These Khosas were of a very different type from the northern Baluchis. They were small and olive-skinned with large slant eyes and slender hands. Their turbans, gay with a great fan-shaped knot on top, were of brilliant colours, and they wore home-spun shirts of red or green and vast black trousers. Each man had an axe in his coloured sash, but the axe-handles were bright with gay designs like children's toys. Their long hair was tied in a loose knot under their turbans. They were friendly and gentle in manner, though their reputation for murderous violence was as bad as that of their northern cousins. Their fury was chiefly conspicuous in faction fights with Makranis or men from the Persian border. In one hamlet the villagers regaled Zaka and his companion with a long recital of their last visit to Diwanabad some years before, when they had met some Persians in the bazar and killed eighteen of them. They told in epic language, clapping their hands and laugh-

ing with joy, how the Persians had fled into a café and how they had pursued them and beaten out their brains with the iron chairs of the café. "Seven of us were hanged for that," they added, "but it was worth it."

"For those who escaped being hanged," said Zaka.

"Aha, we killed one policeman too," laughed the villagers. "He was a pig of a Punjabi. Then we ran, ah, how we ran, like wild goats upon the mountain. It was night-time and the police only caught a few of us. Aha, it was fun to see the fat *banias* scuttling into their houses when they saw us. They shouted 'Ghora! Ghora!' (Horsemen! Horsemen!) as in the old days when we broke the border, for all that we were then on foot and the police were after us."

Many of these Khosas lived by trading in stolen cattle. The lonely villages in the hills were admirable hiding-places for cattle, the loot of some raiding expedition. The Khosas had their herds and it was easy to add to them a few camels or buffaloes which they could claim as their own property; then when the storm blew over the raider would quietly return, remove his loot across the border and pay the Khosas handsomely for their trouble.

Sometimes Zaka and his companion slept out

on the bare hillside sheltered by a great rock. But when they passed the night in one of the hill villages they slept in some little hut already crowded with men and women, with cows, camels and buffaloes. The air would be full of the acrid smell of cowdung and the rank odour of the camels. They would sit smoking from a hookah till far into the night, each man in turn passing on the mouth-piece to his neighbour. And boys would sing *kafis*. In one village they were very proud of a guitar which had been bought by a general subscription from the whole village; but when the villagers were too poor to afford even the luxury of a musical instrument the singers used two large gourd-shaped earthen jars, one of which when struck gave out a dull flat note like a kettledrum and the other a low booming like a plucked guitar-string. The boys bowed themselves over their primitive instruments, and one began humming softly far back in his throat, till he caught the note of the booming jar. After a while one nodded at the other, the drummer, who gave a quick rat-tat on his jar. Then the singer with one hand rapped the narrow mouth of his vessel and with the other struck the wide bowl with his open palm, drawing forth a soft remote re-echoing moan. At first he chanted a rapid sad recita-

tive falling away at the end of each verse in a melancholy cadence, shaking his head as the notes of the song tumbled like a dying fall of bird song. Then his voice grew fuller and stronger. He threw back his head and his eyeballs rolled up behind his eyelids, leaving only the whites visible. He seemed as though wrapt away from the world. His voice rang out clear and confident: "Aha! aha! Al-illah! Al-illah!" He shook with the force of his wild cry. The audience shivered and caught their breath. Some closed their eyes and lay down, overcome with emotion. Others sat rigid with starry eyes fixed on the singer. The smoke of the small wood-fire rose slowly in the fetid air of the narrow cottage. In the shadows the cattle moved uneasily.

The boy sang of Kerbela and of the Imam Husein. His voice throbbed with passion, sweat streamed down his face. He raised his arm and pointed. The armies of the cruel Muawiya were closing round the grandchildren of the Prophet. The singer himself lived through that despairing, tragic day. His agony was demoniac, terrible to see. But he sang and sang, his voice ringing out like the cry of all mankind, mourning yet triumphant.

When the singing was over a bowl of curds

would be passed round, each man taking a sip. Then with a murmured "God keep you in his care" they would roll themselves in their shawls and sleep where they had sat. In a moment there would be silence broken only by the endless measured chewing of the camels in a corner of the cottage.

In the morning Zaka and his companion made an early start. Their hosts brought them a bowl of milk and accompanied them to the boundaries of the village, loosening for their passage the barricade of thornbushes that blocked the only gap in the village wall.

. . . Now they came to the northern borders of Las Bela. They struck west and splashed across a little mountain stream which there divides India from the Khanate of Kalat. It was a calm delightful evening, the sky a soft yellow darkening to bronze and gold, and over it a ripple of fleecy clouds. The hills here were rolling downs covered with grey shingle and coarse grass. Zaka and his companion trudged slowly forward, a sea of hills falling away on either side of them in dim rounded waves. Along the ridge were a few cairns of white stones and there was a hard tang in the air. This was the country of the Brahuis.

At last they saw the low mud wall of the

Sardar's fort, its rough crenellation black against the paling sky. A spearman stood on guard. Zaka's companion called out to him with the thin echoing cry of the hillman, and the spearman unloosed the wooden gate that led into the fort. They went inside into a blaze of light. In the open space before the Sardar's house four lamps were set upon tripods. Against the wall of the building a crowd of tribesmen were standing, the line of their white turbans a cloudy smudge in the shadows. On a raised dais of baked mud the Sardar sat cross-legged on a lacquer couch. He seemed infinitely frail and old. His face had shrivelled back upon its bones, and his deep-sunk eyes were great circles of glowing darkness. A long beard flowed down over his chest. His thin yellow hands, patterned with blue veins like the markings of a snake, lay flat and motionless upon his knees, the long almost transparent fingers splayed out over the white folds of his robe. Still and silent, he gave no sign of life, nor moved at all as Zaka and his companion came across the lighted court; but when the latter knelt and pressed his forehead against the Sardar's feet and laid his turban at the foot of the couch, then the old man trembled suddenly and said "My son . . . my son. . . ."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KITTI pushed back the window shutters and leaned out. What a nightmare sky that was, blood-red and livid green. Below her in the courtyard a group of Khalifas were whispering.

“ . . . And when the keeper of the shrine laid the holy manuscript of the ‘Risalo’ down for a moment by the tomb the marble parted and a white hand rose up and, grasping the book, withdrew again. Yes, the old Mujawir saw that with his own eyes. He sits gibbering and weeping by the tomb. The Book has gone. A hand came up and took it.”

“That must have been the hand of Hashim Shah.”

“Then what can such a portent mean?”

“That he withdraws his countenance from his followers?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. But I am afraid.”

“They say the lashkars are on the move in the hills.”

“Oh? Whose lashkars?”

“I don’t know. But lashkars on the march.

Perhaps only because of the disturbances in Mekran after the death of the old Nawab. . . .”

Kitti could not hear what they were saying but she guessed that they were afraid. There had been a wind of hysteria in the palace all day. At the dawn salutation when the Loors were to utter their strange traditional cry two had suddenly trembled and refused to utter a sound, saying afterwards that lips had breathed icy-cold into their ears and whispered “Cry loudly, for it is the last time.”

And to-day of all days should not be so melancholy, for it was the festival of the river-saint. In the streets of the town people were wearing gay clothes and singing. The sudden panic in the palace had not infected them.

They were bringing the cattle in from the fields now. A boy passed under the palace walls, urging on his buffaloes with a brightly-painted goad, and singing one of the songs that Latif made about the Moghul Governor's daughter:

“I would make a song
Of the mountain hare and the hawk
And the wild deer and all the dark
Shy and O lovely-slim
Creatures that hover and lurk

On the world's rim
In this dawn-murk;
But that, as my fingers stray
Over my lute, I remember
The song I dared to play
Beneath Shafika's chamber,
Nor guessed that by the palace gate
Soldiers lay in wait."

"Ah, lovely, lovely," Kitti murmured. The boy went in under the archway and his voice was drowned in the clamour of the streets.

Suddenly she heard the Pir shuffling into the room behind her. She turned and smiled, and he patted her shoulder affectionately. He pulled up a lacquered stool and sat by the window. In the soft twilight he looked suddenly dignified, almost awe-inspiring, sitting so still with his hands folded in his lap like some old Sumerian law-giver. Kitti laid her hand on his knee, and he took her hand and clasped it between both of his.

"And the *nikah*?" she murmured. He nodded. "We will celebrate it next week."

Her gratitude welled up, almost stifling her. Oh, to be safe at last, and secure. She flung herself upon his chest, burying her face in the folds of his brocaded coat. He began to stroke her hair. "There, there, my beloved one, dear little partridge."

"Oh, it is good of you."

"Foolish little one, did you think I could refuse you anything? Have I not given you everything you asked me for?"

"Yes, yes. You have been so generous to me, unworthy foolish me. But there was just this thing more I wanted."

"I know. And now you will be contented, won't you?"

She nodded happily, looking up at him.

"Look, child," he said, pointing to the river. "They are sending out their prayers to the river-saint already."

People were gathered along the river bank. Lighting little lamps, they set them in toy boats and launched them into the stream. Each boat contained a prayer to the green-robed Prophet. In the deepening twilight the lights flickered like fireflies, dipped and blinked, and suddenly vanished when they reached mid-stream, where the current ran strongly with quick leaping waves.

"Isn't it pretty," Kitti smiled. She had already forgotten the day's fears.

Next week her *nikah*, and then . . . ah, perhaps they could leave Pir-jo-Goth sometimes. Take a house in Quetta and have some fine motors. And she would have a son who would

succeed the Pir on the cushion of sovereignty, a strong, fine lad . . . not like one of the muffled Loors.

Presently the Pir left her for his evening prayers. Always one of the Roshaniyyeh played and sang to him, but to-night he could not find them, there seemed to be none in the palace. . . . But that didn't matter. Nothing mattered really except the thought of Kitti's smooth round head pressed against his breast, and the touch of her hands, and her voice. He opened a copy of the "Risalo" and sat under a lamp, following with his forefinger the wavy lines of spidery Persian script. But he could not fix his attention. . . .

And she sat on at her window. The moon came up over the frontier hills, an enormous amber gong. The hills looked strangely near, a rearing black wave; and the plain beyond the cotton-fields was a wash of smooth sand. There seemed to be a caravan over there coming towards the city. But what a huge caravan. Perhaps some frontier chief travelling with an escort.



She woke with a start. The window was a square of blinding flame and the night seemed

full of an enormous clamour. She sprang out of bed thinking the palace was on fire. But no, it was one of the houses in the street below. But . . . she put her hand to her heart . . . the courtyard was full of men with weapons. And there were others lying still and stiff in queer attitudes with dark pools round them.

She ran to the door and opened it. A dull murmur rose suddenly to a roar. A door crashed in and there were shots and the clatter of rifle-butts. She heard the shrill, wild cries of the negro guards. It was dark in the palace corridors; she shrank back into her room.

"Oh God," she whimpered, "what has happened? . . . has happened? . . ."

Oh, those awful cries, swelling in triumph and hate, like the cries of wild animals . . . and shrieks. . . .

She walked to and fro, wringing her hands. Where is the Pir? Why doesn't he come to me?

And then there were footsteps on the stair. "Oh God, may it be the Pir," she implored.

But as the footsteps came nearer a voice yelled "Where is the whore?" It was a voice she knew . . . but whose? Oh, and I did not lock the door. She made a futile dash forward, but it was too late. She saw shadowy forms

loom up out of the darkness; they threw themselves against the heavy door as she struggled frantically to close it; and then they were in the room.

The two tribesmen stood panting in the doorway, but the man in front—he is a Loor, one of the Pir's own Loors, surely he has come to save me?—the man in front came slowly towards her; and the light from the window shone suddenly upon his wild white eyes above his veil.

“Oh, Zaka!”

He said nothing, but came closer. “Have you come to rescue me? Take me quickly. Why do you stare at me like that?” Her voice fluttered. He caught her waist and she backed against the wall, breathless with sudden terror.

He put his hand on her throat. She struggled and her outstretched hands fastened convulsively on his veil, and the cloth rent and gaped open. His hand suddenly relaxed. She saw that he had a horrible vertical scar traversing the mouth from nose to chin, the symbol of the Gnostic Finger laid across the lips enjoining silence upon the mysteries.

“Yes,” he said softly, “that’s what the veil conceals. And I’ll make you need a veil—a veil to cover that evil white face of yours, the face of a succubus that seduces men to sin, the

face of the Serpent, the face——” His voice cracked, and he began to laugh quite silently. Then he took her by the throat again and drew his knife down slowly and deliberately across her mouth from nose to chin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE morning was full of the brooding fecund calm of autumn. Though a haze of smoke still hung over the town it seemed but a bloom of November mist. Only when a sudden breeze ruffled the waters of the river and sent the lapwings screaming over the palms, did a few ashes drift vaguely down the air.

Soldiers strolled about the ruins, stooping to pick up an occasional trophy in the gutters. The streets were very quiet and still. In the few houses that remained intact, the window-shutters were closed; people could still hardly believe that the recent horrors were over. They peered out nervously, and if they ventured abroad sidled down side-streets, their backs against the wall, looking back always.

A couple of soldiers stopped in front of a shop whose front wall had collapsed; you could see into all the rooms.

"Look Ihsan," one soldier said, "there's a *bania* there."

The other stood on tiptoe. "Oh yes," he nodded, for there sure enough a little *dhoti*-clad

figure lay crumpled in one corner, a large silk-covered book clutched against his chest. On the wall behind him the river-god rose from the waters to succour his followers; but the figure that had been mysterious and hieratic in candle-pricked gloom seemed pitifully crude now, the calm Ravennate smile changed now to a meaningless grin.

"They've rifled his boxes, Sebuktagin."

"You bet. Muhammadans always know what house to make for in a riot—the money-lenders'. Wouldn't have minded being there myself."

They both laughed and went off down the debris-piled street hand in hand.

Two English officers passed.

"Awful show really, wasn't it?"

"He must have been mad, of course. . . ."

" . . . I can't help feeling sorry for the wretched people in the town. That ten days' rule of the new Prophet . . . reminds me of the sort of things one reads about those Anabaptist chaps in the Reformation—John of Leyden at Munster and all that. . . ."

"I'll always remember that moment when we got over the outer wall of the palace and saw the new Prophet johnny on the roof with the flames rearing up behind him. Berserk,

of course, stark fighting mad. Stuck there, screaming like a trapped tiger-cat, till the roof fell in. . . .”

They came to the gate of the city, its blue tiles still smoke-blackened, and came out on the river-bank. At their feet streamed the steely water, opaque and unruffled in the calm empty morning. Lying on his back in the grass a boy with closed eyes was playing on a bamboo flute a little refrain, a plaint of the hills.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HERBERT'S Restaurant was fuller than usual this evening—"even for a Saturday evening" commented Mr. Herbert with satisfaction as he strutted between the tables, his little velvet cap pushed well back from his ant-eater face.

He had prospered, had Mr. Herbert, and there were several waiters now. Poor "John" would long ago have been replaced but that Mr. Herbert liked pitching into him when he was in a bad temper, and John would never throw up his job as the other servants would, and did on the slightest provocation—"result of Congress conspiracies" Mr. Herbert commented, for his nationalist sympathies had been transformed into violent Imperialism ever since the Congress agitation for prohibition.

There were papers on the tables now for his clients to read, copies of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, with photos of Eurasian bathing belles and of popular and industrious Governors entering into all the varied activities of their province by climbing eighty-foot fire-escapes

and patting prize bulls on the head. And at the tables sat groups of young Eurasians, fearful bloods with palm-beach suits and check shirts and bow-ties, saying "damn" and "Oh my God" (pronounced Gudd) every sentence to show how jolly English they were. They were discussing their various bets, for they were accustomed to gamble every day on the current cotton rates. Beside them sat their girls, rather toothy and chinless, with floppy straw hats, gay with artificial flowers, and loud cretonne dresses.

The serious drinkers leant up against the bar. . . . "Same again?"

"Same again Ginger, thanks."

"Ah, it's good to get down to Bombay and have a real old blind."

"Must be very quiet in your place?"

"Oh it is, and a very churchy lot, most of them. No tennis on Sundays and all that. Still, it's all right. I manage to get down to Bombay once every two months."

"I suppose you're not sorry you left the Army?"

"Am I sorry? Christ! I should think not. I don't say that being steward of a little club doesn't give me plenty to do, for it does, and often damned dull work too; but the way I

look at it is like this—at least I'm a free man once I've shut up me office and gone home. Well, I mean to say, it's not ideal. But it stands to reason that it's better being your own master."

"Ah you're right there Ginger," the young sailor's face clouded over. "I'd take anything I could get to be out of the Navy. The *Royal Navy*. But what else is there? Nothing. Nothing but the dole. So as it is, I just stick on, wasting the best years of my life, that's what I'm doing. When you think what you might be doing at home. I tell you, Ginger," he leaned forward and tapped his friend on the chest, "I just live for the day when I can walk into our little house and say 'Hullo Mother,' you know, quiet-like, and just see her jump. She'll be properly glad I can tell you. She never did get used to the idea of my leaving England, but Dad used to laugh at her and call her fussy. And then there was a girl I was fair set on. I wasn't half crazy about her. Well, what's the good, I mean to say, she's bound to have got off with some other chap now. It's only to be expected. I used to try writing to her. But on a destroyer it isn't easy, there's hardly elbow room to read a paper, let alone settle down to write, and there never seemed to

be any ink or anything. . . . So that was that, as they say. Oh there's nothing out here to compare. These jig-a-jig girls the taxiwallas take you to, what are they? All right for a bit of fun, I grant you. But it's not the same thing. It stands to reason doesn't it?"

"Oh, it does. But," Ginger nodded knowingly, "there are some places where you get better stuff. I mean European girls. European? Well, Russian and Greek. . . ."

"That's all right for you, Ginger old pal. You've got the money."

"That's right," Ginger nodded with great satisfaction. His gross red face wrinkled into a grin. "When you got money, you can pick and choose. But I remember when I was a youngster like you and hadn't a rat ever, well, I used to get off with some of these here Eurasian girls." He winked portentously. "Never had any trouble. I suppose it was the kilt that drew 'em. But of course I'm not so young now, and they aren't quite so simple either; but then I don't worry. I go along to this place, Madame Florian's. Oh yes, a real French Madame, it seems; ever so respectable she looks, like one of your aunts who'd come into a bit of money. Oh well, it's nice her being French; it makes it easier to talk to her about

that sort of thing. In fact I don't mind telling you I'm off to her place in not very long from now."

And in fact, after a few more drinks Ginger said, "Well, so long Harry. Probably see you in here to-morrow," and swaggered out.

The sailor followed him and stood on the pavement curb, swaying uncertainly. There was a fine drizzle falling, but it was hot and airless. The motors swished through the puddles, and the bright-lit trams jangled past. A taxi drew up invitingly close to the curb.

"Jig-a-jig, Saheb? I know all good places."

"How much?"

"Anything you like Saheb. Four annas, eight annas, one rupee."

The boy counted his money under a street-lamp.

"Well, look here. I've got a couple o' rupees for you and four annas for a girl. That do? Right. Take me along, and no funny business George."

They left the Fort area and turned down into Grant Road. There were lighted cafés on either side, and asthmatic loud-speakers above each entrance. The pavements were crowded, Baluch turbans jostled Gandhi caps, shaved wrinkled heads bobbed along beside buttered

Pathan lovelocks, and over all the sleek umbrellas dipped and swayed under the soft rain.

They came to a dark narrow street. In each barred window a girl's face was framed. The taxi-driver drew up at one house, indistinguishable from the dozen or so others.

"Here you are, Saheb."

"This all right?" the sailor asked as he stumbled out of the car.

"Oh yes, Saheb. Very good girl." He drew out a newspaper from his pocket and lit a native cigarette.

The sailor pushed open the ramshackle door and went in. The girl who had been sitting meekly on the wooden bed got up.

"Well, let's have a look at you," he said. He pulled her towards him and drew the fold of her sari away from over her face. "God, what have you been doing to yourself?" he asked, for she had a nasty scar across her mouth. Even in the dim light of the room it gaped red. "Well, that's an awful cut, isn't it? It's a good thing I'm not drunker than I am or I wouldn't know which way on to kiss you. I might be kissing all sideways, mightn't I, eh?" He put his arm around her.

When he had finished and stumbled out to-

wards his taxi, she sat up, patted the mattress, put her sari on, and sat awaiting the next customer, her hand holding forward the fold of her sari so as to cover her mouth and nose.

THE END

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